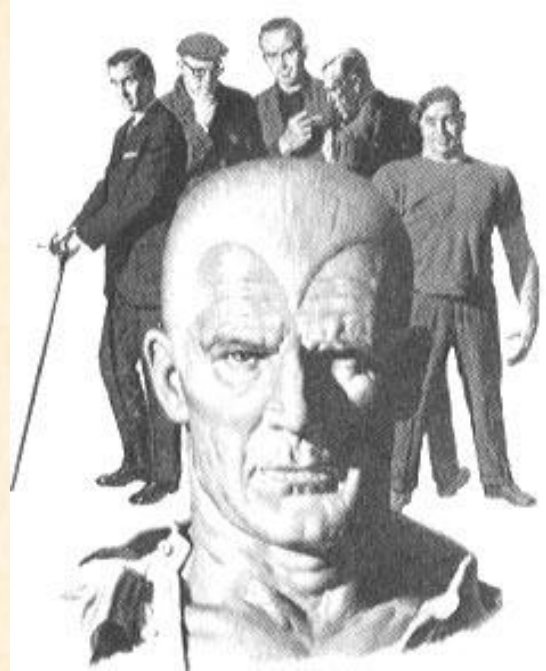
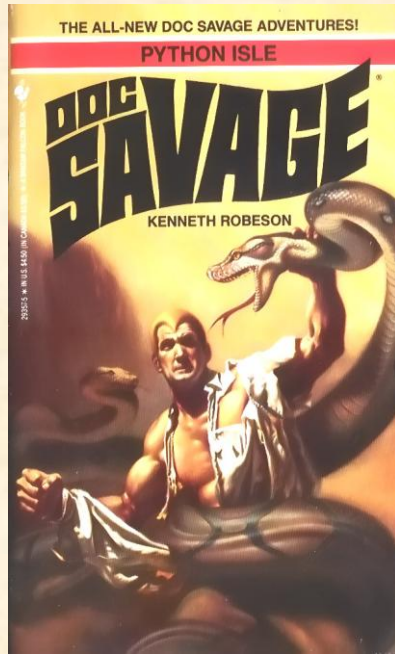


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Doc Savage Magazine #184 - **"Python Isle"** by Will Murray - October/1991
{Bantam Cover by Joe DeVito}



*When a long-thought dead aviator returned, he and a mysterious woman flew a battered plane that had been repaired with plates of pure **Gold**.*

*Seeking aid from the **Man of Bronze**, a raging battle shortly ensues for control of the lost secret of Python Isle!*




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The adventurers of Doc Savage originally appeared in magazine format in 1933-1949. Note that this timeframe was before jet planes and the semiconductor technology to which we are accustomed today. The fastest planes were 400-mph propeller jobs and vacuum tube technology still ruled radio. The most fantastic weapons encountered by Doc may have been based on of John Keely's "*vibrational*" and Nikola Tesla's "*scalar-wave*" theories [<http://www.stealthskater.com/Bearden.htm>] that were popular then.

At times, the writing style of the various Doc Savage "ghostwriters" was influenced by the prevailing sentiments of the Nation's reading audience of that era. As a result, a few portions might not be "*politically correct*" in today's society. Minor editing efforts have been made in these archives to "update" these. Finally -- as a rough estimate -- multiply all dollar(\$) amounts by 10 to convert to '2004' dollars (e.g., \$5 back then would be \$50 today).

#184 Python Isle

by *Will Murray* (October/1991)

the Adventures of Doc Savage	by 'Kenneth Robeson' (house name)	Bantam Cover Artists
refer to DS000.doc for a biography of all the Kenneth Robeson "ghostwriters"   	Lester Dent (creator and main author)	James Bama (created 72 covers)
	Harold A. Davis (wrote 13 adventures)	Bob Larkin (created 77 covers)
	Laurence Donovan (wrote 9 adventures)	Fred Pfeiffer (created 14 covers)
	Philip J. Farmer (wrote 1 adventure)	Boris Vallejo (created 6 covers)
	Will Murray (wrote 7 adventures)	Doug Rosa (created 2 covers)
	William G. Bogart (wrote 14 adventures)	Jim Aviati (created 1 cover)
	Ryerson Johnson (wrote 3 adventures)	Mort Kunstler (created 1 cover)
	Alan Hathway (wrote 4 adventures)	Peter Richardson (created 1 cover)
		Roger Kastel (created 4 covers)

{limited editing/embellishing and electronic formatting by '*StealthSkater*' - April/2005}

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Prologue

The island looked utterly forlorn.

It was a small bare rock jutting up from the *frigid* waters of the Arctic north of Hudson Bay.

Ice caked its shore line and powdery snow veined inland fissures. *Howling* winds tore the snow from those crevices and made them into white dancing devils.

Once -- ages ago -- the island had been volcanic. But now it was only a dead forbidding-looking crater whose ice-encrusted base seeped pale, yellowish subterranean gases. The *icy* northern blasts tore these exhalations into scraps and bore them out to sea.

It was to avoid the noxious gases -- the reason the island was avoided by Eskimos who believed it to be hoodooed -- that the black autogyro approached the crater at over 1,000 feet.

In the cockpit, the pilot gripped the rocker arm which controlled the tiny craft. His hands were unusual.

They were strong hands in which *tendons* played with a power remindful of hawsers. In addition, it could be seen that the pilot's skin was of a metallic *bronze* hue, finely textured.

One of the hands tipped back the rocker arm. Its propeller throttled, the autogyro descended like a parachute, its windmill vanes producing a braking effect against the *chill* air.

The black craft came in at a precise 30-degree angle. The crater rim loomed. Within it shining under the distant Arctic sun lay a perpetually *frozen* lake.

The gyro settled onto the *ice*. It rolled only a feet forward.

The **Bronze Man** stepped from the plane. He secured the craft's wheels with chocks, then glided easily and without mishap across the slippery *ice*.

The crater rim rose fully 7 feet above the frozen lake. The hood of the **Bronze Man's** enveloping parka almost topped the rim in those places where its irregular edge was less than a full 7 feet.

For the briefest of moments, he faced the crater rim far above the poisonous exhalations below.

Then a section of gray rock heaved up, disclosing an illuminated flight of stone steps.

The **Bronze Man** vanished down those stairs. The section of rock promptly slipped back into place, leaving no trace of its existence.

A stillness fell upon the lonely isle. The wind continued to *howl*. But the imps of drifting snow ceased to rise into the cold. The big rotors of the black autogyro turned lazily as if plucked by idle invisible fingers.

But that was all. Within the pit of the fortress-like dead crater, the **Bronze Man** toiled in solitude ...

I -- The Scarecrow

It was a diamond smuggler named "King" Hancock who was the first to sight the strange monoplane. This later proved to be extremely unfortunate.

Had King Hancock not chanced to be gazing out at the Indian Ocean at that moment, it is quite probably that considerable trouble -- not to mention several **deaths** -- might have been avoided.

King Hancock did not look like a diamond smuggler. He did not even look like a crook. He was a spry, dapper-looking individual who wore his hair slicked back and his mustache thin and pointed.

He wore a long Prince Albert coat in spite of the **heat**. It was King Hancock's trademark.

Actually, "King" was not his given name. He had come into the world as Bartholomew Hancock. But he claimed to be a descendant of John Hancock, the natty Revolutionary figure who also had sported the appellation "King".

This current "King" Hancock had made it his life's work to emulate his famous ancestor. Except that the present "King" was a rogue.

Not that he was evil. King Hancock hadn't an evil bone in his body. But not a good bone, either.

King Hancock hadn't any particular inclinations either way, he was fond of saying. But he did like to dress and eat well. And he did like money.

This was why King Hancock was currently lounging at the rail of the tramp steamer *Mighty* which was 2 days out of Durban, South Africa with a clandestine cargo of purloined diamonds.

The plane swept out of the Northern horizon. It was a small craft built for speed.

It behaved strangely. One wing dipped erratically. The drone of its motor sounded like a bumblebee with a bad case of hiccups.

The strange plane angled toward the *Mighty*. It was then that King Hancock snapped out of his casual pose.

"Cap'n!" he yelled. "Trouble at 10 o'clock!"

At once, the decks of the decrepit steamer were aswarm with cursing, hard-faced men of varying nationalities. Rifles were brought out of hiding places. Deck plates were pried up and squat deck guns hoisted into the African sun.

"What-the-bloody-blazes is going on?" a voice exploded.

It might have come from one of the tram's **rust**-scabbed funnels. But it belonged to "Blackbird" Hinton -- notorious diamond smuggler and skipper of the *Mighty*.

Blackbird Hinton was a short rangy man who walked with a pronounced rolling gait. His cold **black** eyes wore a perpetual sun-squint. He was dressed in **black**. His coat, pants, shoes, and even his captain's cap were as **black** as an unlucky cat.

His face was **brown** and shiny like a bird's beak. *He was not called "Blackbird" without reason.*

"Where did that bloody-damned plane come from?" Blackbird demanded of his first mate -- King Hancock -- when he saw the strange craft.

"I don't know. It was just ... there," Hancock explained.

Blackbird Hinton telescoped a jet-black spyglass and peered through it.

"Any markings/" Hancock inquired.

"No. Looks beat up, though."

Blackbird's mahogany **face** was grim. His forehead was dry in contrast to King Hancock's perspiration-streaked visage.

He passed the spyglass. "What do you make of it?"

King Hancock wiped *sweat* from his brow and peered heavenward.

"Looks to be in trouble all right. I'd say they're running low on fuel."

"Could be a trap," Blackbird said suspiciously.

Behind him, the *Mighty's* crew watched the tiny plane approach hesitantly. Their guns were held ready.

"There's a funny gleam on one wing," Hancock remarked. "But I can't make out what it is."

The strange plane drew closer. Its bumblebee drone continued intermittently. One wing (the shiny one) dipped repeatedly and it was plain to see that the pilot was having difficulty keeping level.

It continued on a direct line to the wallowing tramp steamer.

"Which way did you say it came from?" Blackbird demanded.

"Due north," Hancock replied. "Nothing but monsoons up there."

Black bird considered ... then turned to his crew.

"Shoot it down!" he screamed. "It's the Law up there!"

Gunfire erupted from the rolling deck. Rifles kicked! The deck guns remained silent because the plane was directly overhead.

One crook fell over dead in the heat of the excitement. A bullet fired straight up had returned to deck after losing velocity. It stove in the top of his skull.

A thin tail of smoke grew out of one wing of the beat-up plane. The tail spouted *fiery red* feathers. Then oily smoke.

The shiny wing heeled precariously for a long moment. Then the craft plunged toward the water. Shooting ceased then.

Blackbird Hinton ran his thick hands over his dark coat front. He looked like an evil raven preening himself after a meal.

"That takes care of him," he grunted.

But it didn't.

At the last possible moment, the plane righted ... got level ... and pancaked into the Indian Ocean less than a mile from the *Mighty's* stern.

The craft did not sink although the crew watched it like carrion birds, waiting for the waves to claim the tiny ship.

"Probably the South African authorities," King Hancock mused out loud. "They must have found that diamond mine we raided 2 days ago. Maybe there were survivors we didn't know about."

"That's just what I'm thinkin'," Blackbird said.

He stared at the plane. One wing was entirely awash. That meant that the cabin was filing.

At length, the *Mighty* skipper gave his first mate orders.

"Take some men in a launch and check that bird out. Take prisoners. But make sure that plane gets the 'deep six'. If the Law is on our trail, we're better off knowin' about it."

Dapper King Hancock barked orders. Men fell to.

Soon, a launch was racing toward the stricken plane.

The launch did not approach the crippled aircraft directly.

At King Hancock's direction, the launch crew circled the plane with eyes alert and modern rifles handy. Standing in the bow, Hancock looked a little like Napoleon in his Prince Albert.

"Man alive!" a deckhand exclaimed when they drew close. "Did we shoot him up that bad?"

The plane was a sight! Its fuselage was a patchwork of repairs and makeshift plates covering (sometimes barely so) various vents and holes.

"Glory be!" someone ventured. "If those ain't **gold** plates holdin' that wing together!"

The scarecrow of the skies was indeed repaired with **gold**, it was plain to see. Fist-sized patches of the **yellow** metal mottled one wing. What might have been **golden** rivets studded the craft's air surfaces. The propeller blade was **gilded** in spots, perhaps for strength.

Strangest of all were the designs. Almost every inch of gold had a design hammered into it. These were difficult to make out. Except one.

On the **gold**-sheathed wing, a **serpent** wound its coils. The sight was some barbaric, sinister.

An eerie *silence* fell over the launch. King Hancock broke this.

"That's one of those transoceanic jobs," he said. "Like the one that Lindbergh flew to Paris."

His voice was strangely quiet.

"Hold your fire, men. The Law didn't send that bird after us."

It was fortunate that the natty diamond smuggler ventured his opinion at that exact moment. Because his men -- nervous at the vision of the weird craft -- were becoming trigger-happy and doubtless would have fired when the cabin door suddenly popped open.

An apparition emerged from the cabin and onto a brine-washed wing. If anything, this individual was even more remarkable than the scarecrow of a plane that had lately come seemingly out of nowhere.

It was a man. But one dressed as none of cutthroats from the Mighty had ever seen a man attired.

He wore an odd costume. It might have been an abbreviated smoke jacket except that it was white, edged with **gold**, and its skirt fell only to the man's knees. His arms and legs were completely bare.

"Is that a dress that bloke's got on?" someone wanted to know.

"Maybe it's a kilt," another laughed. "The Scots get around."

The fantastic individual in white ignored them. He reached into the cabin door. If the astonishment aboard the launch had been great before, it now grew by yards after the second individual quitted the strange skybird.

For that one was a woman!

She too was strangely costumed. But her garb consisted of a trailing gown of purple and white.

Her hair was black, glossy, and pinned high on her head with a **golden** ornament. She seemed very young. Her face was a nice oval. She was a vision!

"This is getting' interestin'," a man to Hancock's left remarked, licking dry lips.

"Shut up!" Hancock barked. "Orders are to take them aboard. Hop to it!"

The launch -- its engine throttled -- pushed toward the plane. The black-haired vision spotted them and yelled something no one caught.

"What'd she say?"

"Never mind," King Hancock said shortly. "Watch them! They're going to swim for it!"

They tried. The odd pair jumped into the sea, surfacing together some yards ahead.

"Boat hooks!" Hancock ordered.

The long hooked poles used to steady docking craft sprouted from the launch like quills.

"Steady as she goes," he told the man at the engine. "We don't want to run them over. Get the woman first."

The launch eased toward the bobbing head of the swimming girl. She cast frightened eyes over a shoulder and redoubled her efforts. Nearby, her companion called out in a foreign tongue.

Engine idling, the launch glided unerringly after her.

"Grab her quick! You won't need the hooks."

King Hancock was correct. The launch all-but-bumped the girl.

A big seaman reached down and pulled her out by her shoulders. She struggled violently. Then subsided as it dawned on her that the bull seaman was more than her match.

"Hold on to her now" came the command. The launch -- once more under power -- came about and bore down on the swimming man.

The strange fugitive in white -- they saw not that he had flaming **red** hair -- abruptly ceased swimming and began treading water. He waited for the launch calmly.

"Get those hooks out," Hancock warned. "He may give us a fight."

But the swimmer did not ... at first. He merely grasped a proffered boat hook and allowed himself to be pulled to the launch's side. String hands assisted him aboard. He accepted these readily.

The **redheaded** man stood amidships with seawater stringing off the skirt of his garment. He was tall and gangling. His hair was the color of new **rust** and his eyes -- in contrast to the sloe orbs of his companion -- were bright **blue**.

King Hancock -- no less out of place in his long coat than the other -- now approached.

"Got a name, mate?" he asked.

The redhead answered by way of a *roundhouse right* to the dandified diamond smuggler's pointed jaw!

King Hancock's head rocked back under the powerful punch. But for a quick-witted crewman, he would have been precipitated into the drink.

They jumped the **redhead**. Blow fell! Men grunted. The launch rocked to the sound of men in violent combat.

"No guns!" Hancock warned. "And someone hold on that girl!"

The strange antagonist proved himself to be quite a fighter. 2 men fell unconscious, their jaws whacked out of shape.

A boat hook *swished* by him but missed. Another descended on his thatch of carrot hair. He heard it coming and twisted. But the pole caught him painfully in the shoulder and he went down.

The sloe-eyed girl screamed. Someone clapped a big paw over her mouth, effectively silencing her.

The **red-haired** man lay unmoving across a thwart.

"That settles his hash," the boat-hook wielder announced proudly.

"Okay," King Hancock said, rubbing his bruised jaw. "He'll keep. Take us back to the ship."

The launch got under way.

King Hancock sat in the bow facing the captured girl who was seated between 2 burly ruffians. His eyes were intent upon her obvious charms.

Even soaked to the skin, this vision from the sea was an entrancing creature. She held her head high in a way that was almost regal. And perhaps a bit disdainful. King Hancock had never seen anything so fetching in his life.

"Some dish," one of the men remarked, jerking his thumb toward the girl.

"Pipe down!" the dapper crooks snapped. "She can hear you."

"So what?" the worthy argued. "You heard her talk. She can't speak English, it's plain to see."

"Just shut up, then."

The other shrugged.

"You're the boss, mate."

All eyes were on the enchanting girl in white as the launch beat back toward the *Mighty*. Thus no one noticed the vanquished prisoner surreptitiously open **blue** eye and extract an object from his clothes, then concealed it under a thwart.

*If someone had, he would have seen that the object as a length of **bamboo**.*

Blackbird Hinton was standing on the tramp steamer's deck like a great black crow when King Hancock clambered aboard.

"I thought I told you to scuttle that blasted plane!" he roared.

"Take another look at it through the glass," the natty crook exhorted. "It's covered with gold plates. No wonder it was in trouble. One wing is three-quarters **gilt**!"

Blackbird looked. Then he shouted orders to the wheelhouse.

"Get alongside that plane before it sinks!"

To his First Mate, he said: "Ready a crew with the boom."

"Aye aye, Cap'n," King Hancock saluted.

By this time, the prisoners had been hauled aboard. The raven-like diamond smuggler strode toward them with his rolling gait. Both the girl and her companion were walking under their own power.

"This one doesn't speak English," a sailor offered, indicating the girl. "We're not sure about this guy, though. He gave us a fight."

"So I noticed," Blackbird said sarcastically. "I also noticed that it took most of you lubbers to bring him down. We've got almost a half-million dollars in uncut diamonds aboard this tub with the South African law apt to be breathin' down out necks most any time. And you swabs can't even handle one guy. And a guy in a dress at that!"

The men looked sheepish. No one spoke a word.

"And what about you?" Blackbird roared, turning on the **red-haired** captive. "What have you to say for your bloody self?"

"What ship is this?" the prisoner asked. He spoke acceptable English.

"This is the *Mighty*, me bucko. As fine a hellship as ever prowled the seven blasted seas. I'm her skipper. Call me Blackbird."

"What destination?"

"Bombay, India. If that means anythin' to you."

The prisoner nodded. "It does. What year is this?"

Blackbird Hinton <blinked> button eyes.

"What?" he roared.

"I asked what year is this?"

Blackbird <blinked>.

Then he blurted: "1934. Are you daft?!"

The **redhead** let out a long gusty sigh.

"7 years! Incredible! I can't believe it's been that long."

Before the **black**-clad skipper could continue this conversation, the *Mighty* drifted alongside the damaged aircraft.

A boom swung out and lines dropped, whizzing. Seamen slid down those lines and secured them to various points on the plane. A signal was then given.

Then the boom slowly raised the scarecrow plane. Water rushed out of its cabin.

When most of it had been drained, the boom swung inward and deposited the plane in a gaping hold.

"Let's see this **gilded** bird," Blackbird rumbled. "Bring the prisoners along."

Most of the crew (including King Hancock) and the prisoners went below to inspect the crippled plane. It was, they saw, a metal Harlequin.

It was patched and repaired with multitudinous **gold** plates. The entire craft resembled a dural and **gold** jigsaw puzzle.

Moreover, most of the plates were cunningly wrought as if by master artisans. One wing (the left) was completely sheathed in thinly beaten **gold**.

Virtually every **golden** surface was ornamented by **serpent** designs. Singly, in pairs, and intertwined. They were repulsive. Like swollen **veins**.

"Snakes," someone muttered. "Gives me the creeps."

"What beats me," another put in, "is how he could flown this thing in the first place. Lindy himself would have had a tough time with it."

"Lindy?" the **red-haired** prisoner asked puzzledly.

"Yeah. Charles Lindbergh. The hotshot who flew across the Atlantic. Say! I never knew anyone who hadn't heard of Lindbergh!"

"So," the other said wistfully, "someone finally made a transatlantic hop."

"What are you tryin' to pull?" Blackbird snarled.

Before he could get an answer, King Hancock -- who had been hovering attentively around the girl prisoner -- came rushing up.

"Cap'n, that girl is talking a mile-a-minute in a lingo I never heard before," he reported.

"What of it?"

"She keeps repeating a name," Hancock insisted.

"What name?"

Dapper King Hancock swallowed noticeably. He was having difficulty with his words.

"Well?" Blackbird Hinton bellowed. "What name?"

King Hancock croaked 2 words.

"Doc Savage."

A hush fell over the murky hold. All eyes turned toward the girl in white and purple. Sweat oozed from dirty foreheads. King Hancock licked his pointed mustache. Blackbird Hinton nervously commenced his preening motions, smoothing his black coat front repeatedly.

"Doc Savage," Blackbird repeated hollowly.

It would have been hard to imagine a more unsavory lot of criminals than Blackbird Hinton and his crew.

Not 2 days ago, they had fallen upon a hapless diamond mine on the east coast of South Africa. They slaughtered its workers to a man and then made off with a young fortune in uncut stones.

They were bloody-handed diamond smugglers and worse. Yet every one of them visibly paled at the mention of the name **"Doc Savage"**.

Even in this out-of-the-way corner of the World, the name of Doc Savage had carried. He was a renowned adventurer. But much more than that. He was the supreme Adventurer. Everything about the *Man of Bronze* (as the newspapers called him) was superlative.

He was reputed to be a fabulous individual who had been placed in the hands of a succession of scientists at birth. These men had raised him to be a "superman".

And they had succeeded. Doc Savage had grown up to be a mental marvel and a muscular Midas. His life's work -- so the story went -- was to travel to the far ends of the Earth helping those in trouble and punishing evildoers.

In the silence which followed the utterance of the dreaded name of **"Doc Savage"**, each man in Blackbird's crew considered the fact that he was himself a wrongdoer. And that this was certainly one of the far corners of the World.

Blackbird Hinton swung suddenly on his redheaded prisoner.

"What's your connection with Doc Savage?" he demanded.

Defiant **blue** eyes bored into Blackbird's own. The prisoner said nothing.

Hinton drew a spike-nosed pistol (a **black** one) and waved it meaningfully.

"I asked you a blasted question!"

The prisoner remained adamant.

In a rage, Blackbird pointed his pistol at the girl.

"One last time," he grated. "What's your connection with Doc Savage?"

King Hancock interposed.

"Wait! If this guy is hooked up with Savage, killing the girl is only going to get us in deeper. We can't afford that."

Blackbird hesitated. The girl stood calmly, regarding them without comprehension.

It was a little eerie. She flinched not at all under the pistol's snout. It was as if she did not understand what the weapon was.

That -- more than King Hancock's words -- decided the raven-like skipper.

"Stick them in the cabin across from mine," he ordered a seaman. "We're a hundred miles out. They'd have no place to go if they tried somethin' stupid."

He said it so that the **red-haired** prisoner would get the message.

The strange captives were taken away.

The African sun set early (but very slowly) inasmuch as the tramp *Mighty* was steaming into the sunset. **Red** dusk swathed the disreputable ship.

No other ships had been sighted since the scarecrow plane had been brought down. Ahead lay the Cape of Good Hope where the Indian Ocean becomes the Atlantic.

A lull descended upon the smuggling vessel during which there was considerable discussion of the **gold**-plated aircraft and its weird passengers.

Currently, this was centered in the ship's mess where the crew was enjoying their supper. Or as much as they could. The *Mighty* -- whose crew was composed of crooks and wharf-rats from 3

continents --was shorthanded. Thus the food was terrible. And the cabin in which the prisoners were being held was not guarded while the crew ate.

The prisoners had proven to be quiet and seemingly content to await developments. King Hancock had reported that all was well after personally delivering their food. Most of the crew noted the dapper First Mate's interest in the captives. And especially the girl. He became the butt of not a few ribald jests.

Most of the talk, however, dwelt upon the **gold**. Several thousand dollars' worth had been stripped from the scarecrow plane. This occasioned much speculation. The upshot of which was that anyone who would repair a plane with **gold** evidently had plenty to spare.

So it was that no one was about when the 2 prisoners eased out of their cabin and down a companionway.

"I spotted a radio room on our way in," the **redhead** remarked. "It may be deserted now. Everything else is."

The girl did not respond.

They located the radio room.

"Empty! Now maybe I can get a message to Doc Savage."

At the name "Doc Savage", the black-haired woman broke into voluble speech.

"*Sh-h-h-h!*" the **redhead** admonished. "Pipe down, Lha. Or they'll ..."

Then realizing that his companion spoke no English, he shifted to another tongue.

The girl promptly quieted. Her black eyes, however, held an impatient light.

The gangling man sat down and warmed up the sending set. He began to tap out a hurried message.

Heavy feet sounded in the passageway outside. The **red-haired** one almost jumped out of his chair. He furiously worked the sending key.

"The hell!" a voice roared.

Then Blackbird Hinton plunged into the radio room.

"I'll fix you, mate!"

The other bounded out of his chair. A fist connected. The diamond smuggler bounced backward. For all his gangling looks, the **redhead** was quite a scrapper.

He dragged the woman addressed as "Lha" out onto the deck. Behind him, Blackbird was bawling for help at the top of his leathery lungs.

When they gained the deck, the captives found it swarming with men. They raced aft.

"Got to find that launch!" the scrappy **redhead** panted.

He did. It was wet from recent immersion. So he knew it was the craft they had been rescued in (if "rescue" was the correct term for it).

The launch was hung on davits. These swung easily out.

The man stepped aboard and rapped out strange words to the girl as he prepared to release the lines that would lower the boat into the sea.

Before the girl could join him, **rifles** started banging forward! Lead chewed the ship's rail and made a **squeak-rip** of a sound as it tore off a vicious foot-long splinter near the girl. She jumped backward in startlement.

"Grab the girl!" King Hancock screamed.

She hesitated, confused.

Her companion called out: "Lha!"

Then a quick-thinking soul got a fishing net ... gave it a quick toss ... and snared her. Other seamen made for the suspended launch.

For a moment, it looked as though the **red-haired** fighter was about to plunge into the oncoming men.

Instead, he said "Damn!" feelingly and started the motor.

The launched, released, smashed into the ocean. It dug in her stern and raced away at a high rate-of-speed, throwing up great sheets of brine. Bullets **whupped** into the water. But none hit the careening craft.

Once out of range, the redhead reached under a thwart and withdrew the length of bamboo which he had earlier secreted there. He examined this.

It was an ordinary tube of jointed bamboo. Except that it was closed at either end with blue sealing wax. Each end bore a weird design which had been pressed into the wax when it was hot.

The design was that of a twisting serpent. The seals had not been tampered with, he found.

He looked back at the darksome tramp streamer now receding in the night.

"This is all I have left now," he said to himself, "to prove to the World that the whole incredible thing really happened to me."

II -- The Bamboo Tube

It was well past Midnight according to the flame-haired castaway's calculations when the stolen launch ran out of fuel.

The motor sputtered for a few minutes ... gave a cough ... and finally expired.

"Damn!" he cursed.

He worked the engine in hopes of squeezing out a last few knots. Then he sat down disgustedly.

The sea -- now that the launch was no longer knifing through the swells under its own power -- grew choppy. There was no Moon. The murk was unrelieved.

For the 3rd time, the castaway searched for a lantern. But the boat was bare of provisions. There was not even a solitary oar with which to propel the craft.

He cursed his ill luck steadily for the better portion of an hour. His teeth chattered in the cool night. Eventually, he grew exhausted and slept across a hard wet thwart. He shivered in his sleep ...

... but he did not sleep long.

He awoke to the sound of a faraway voice.

At first, he thought he was dreaming. Especially when the cobwebs cleared from his mind and he realized that the far voice was singing.

The song was "Waltzing Matilda". The singer was no songbird, however. He was noticeably off-key.

"What the hell!"

The **red-haired** one swiveled his head in the general direction of the voice. It proved to be coming from a ship some distance astern. A passenger liner. It was only by virtue of the clear night and steady wind that the strains of "Waltzing Matilda" were carried all the way to the becalmed launch.

Ignoring that fact, the shivering castaway stood up and waved his bare arms wildly.

He shouted: "Ahoy the ship! Over here! Can't you hear me? **Over here!!**"

But the wind defeated his efforts. The huge oceangoing liner plowed on past. The castaway discerned the name *H.M.S. Brisbane* by the light of its bow.

"Nothing to do but swim," he decided.

Reaching into his shirt front, he checked the bamboo tube.

Then he dived into the chill waters and swam in the direction of the warbling notes.

That castaway was an excellent swimmer. He made good time.

But the liner *Brisbane* had the advantage of her great diesel engines. It bore inexorably onward leaving the swimmer behind.

When the **red-haired** one realized he stood no chance of overhauling the great ship, he let out a *scream!* It consisted of no words. Just a merely high piercing sound. It was not a dignified noise for a man to make. But as an attention getter, it was hard to beat.

That the scream worked was evidenced by the abrupt cessation of a chorus of "Waltzing Matilda".

"*Ahoy the Brisbane!*" the **carrot**-topped swimmer yelled. "*I'm over here! In the water!*"

There came a concerted shouting. A searchlight sprang into life washing the ocean with white-hot **light**. It roved until it finally pinned a bobbing head.

More shouting! A foghorn blew mournfully, evidently without purpose. The castaway treaded water and waited. He cursed the ship's crew -- who kept the incandescent **light** in his eyes -- and hung a brown arm over his face.

Presently, the *putt-putt* of a lifeboat announced that rescue was imminent.

"Easy there, lad" called out a voice as sturdy hands pulled the soaked swimmer from the choppy waves. "You're safe now."

A coarse woolen blanket was offered. His teeth clicking, the **redhead** accepted it.

"T-thanks," he chattered.

"How did you get out here, laddie?" a man asked gently.

"Boat sank," the other lied.

"Any others with you?"

"N-no. I was alone."

"Right, then. Back we go. Some hot coffee will fix you up good-and-proper."

Once safely aboard the *H.M.S. Brisbane*, the **flame**-haired man became the subject of much attention.

By that time, the nature of his strange garb had become apparent to all. Also, his bare arms and legs had turned a corpse-**blue** in the cold air.

These -- combined with his bright **fiery** crop of hair -- lent him a bizarre, unearthly aspect.

"HT'll be damned," a Cockney steward exclaimed. "If 'e ain't the spittin' h'image o' Davy Jones 'imself!"

Passengers -- aroused by the strident note of the foghorn -- crowded around the landing stage as the lifeboat was recovered. Excited questions flew. But none were answered as the *freezing* castaway was rushed to a stateroom by the businesslike crew.

By morning, rumor would have it that the *blue* man had been sighed astride a dolphin and engaged in mortal combat with a tiger shark. The latter had gotten the dolphin (so the story went) and the blue man had asked to be rescued, claiming that he was the son of Neptune, king of the sea.

Actually, the object of this wild talk not only wasn't claiming any such thing but steadfastly refused to answer any-and-all questions. To the *Brisbane* skipper's utter consternation.

The captain (his name was Sampson) found his new passenger in a stateroom greedily drinking piping-*hot* coffee. He drank 4 cups (black) one after the other as if coffee were a new beverage (or one not imbibed in a long time).

Captain Sampson patiently waited until the 4 cups had been downed. Then he politely announced:

"This is the *H.M.S. Brisbane* out of Perth, Australia. We are bound, my good man, for Cape Town, South Africa. Should see port by daybreak as a matter-of-fact."

The *flame*-haired one (he was no longer *blue*) smiled ironically at the news.

"So I'm going to make Cape Town after all, am I?"

And that was all he said for the rest of the night despite the repeated exhortations of Captain Sampson.

At length, the sturdy skipper gave up and the *red-haired* sphinx was left to sleep the remainder of the evening away.

" 'E'll be more talkative by mornin', mark my words," the Cockney steward ventured. "Them who sit around in the bloomin' drink like that one usually are slow to get their wits back. And 'e'll 'ave a tale to relate, HT'll tell a man!"

That last was not exactly true. The fact was that only one man saw the mysterious castaway after that. He was an Australian named "Wallabee" Walgett.

Walgett was a steward who had flipped a coin with his Cockney compatriot over which of them would have the privilege of serving the rescued man's breakfast. And who -- consequently -- would get another look at him.

The coin came up tails. The Cockney had lost. That was unfortunate.

Had it not been the Australian who brought the flame-haired one his food, the latter would probably have been turned over to the Cape Town authorities for questions. Much subsequent trouble would have been avoided.

But as it was, Wallabee Walgett strode whistling to the designated stateroom. He was whistling "Waltzing Matilda". The previous night, he had been singing it. He wanted a closer look at the man whom he had discovered in the water.

Carrying a covered tray, Wallabee Walgett knocked and entered. The tray contained flapjacks, scrambled eggs, orange juice, and a pot of steaming coffee.

This became apparent when the Australian dropped the tray immediately upon entering the cabin.

"Well blow me down!" he ejaculated. "You! I recognize you, mate. **You're Tom Franklin!**"

The **redhead** turned cold **blue** eyes toward the steward. He jumped out of his bunk. He was still clad in his strange kilt-like costume.

"Too bad you recognized me," he said evenly. "Too bad for you."

He cracked a tight brown fist against the steward's blocky jaw. The latter went down with a long whistling sigh. He knees buckled together and he sank as if he were melting.

It was almost comical. Like the scene from a silent movie. Except for the look of repressed fury on the face of the man who had been called "Tom Franklin".

The castaway poked his head out of the stateroom. He satisfied that no one was about and worked his way to the deck warily. There he huddled beside a lifeboat.

Off to the port, he spied Table Mountain. It was the principle landmark of Cape Town. At its base, the white buildings of the city basked in the early sun.

With a satisfied grunt, the castaway slipped over the rail and dived into the water. It was warm this time. He struck out for shore.

No one noticed his departure or heard the splash of his dive.

He was not missed until it was too late.

To most Americans, the African continent conjures up images of tropical jungles in which lions, elephants, and savage hunters lurk.

It is a fact that all of these -- and more -- can be found in the remote areas of Africa such as the Belgian Congo. But not in all areas. Hosts of Dutch, English, and German colonists had done much toward civilizing the so-called "Dark Continent".

For the same reasons that a foreign visitor should not expect to see cactus and Indians in New York City, there were no wild beasts or pygmy warriors in Cape Town (one of the most civilized spots in all of Africa). It was a thoroughly modern metropolis after the European fashion. It boasted its share of municipal buildings, factories, a railroad station, and a busy waterfront.

The dock area was especially bustling this fine morning in expectation of the arrival of the liner Brisbane. Dock wallopers milled about.

Taxicabs lined up to receive passengers just like they did in New York City. And -- as might be expected of hackmen the world over -- an argument broke out over the occupation of a parking stand. The fight attracted a crowd.

Thus it was that no one saw the **fire-haired** man -- Tom Franklin -- emerge from the water and slip into the back seat of a waiting taxi.

The driver returned momentarily. He was startled when a voice from the back seat said "Downtown, driver".

The cab got going and wheeled into traffic. The hack slid through Cape Town's tenement section where a conglomeration of Black, Asiatic, and other peopled lived. Churches were common. And Mosques nearly so.

In land, a cloud -- the well-known "tablecloth" -- seemed to smother the flat top of looming Table Mountain. On either side of the mesa-like rock, Devil's Peak and Lion's Head reared up into the low-lying cloud cover.

Tom Franklin leaned back in the cab's rear paying these sights no heed. He shut his eyes as if in weariness. He might have been asleep.

The hackman intruded upon his thoughts with a query.

"What address, my man?" he asked.

Tom Franklin stirred and leaned forward.

"Have you ever heard of **Doc Savage**?"

"Eh?" The driver was startled.

"I asked if you had ever heard of **Doc Savage**," Franklin repeated.

"And who hasn't!" the driver snorted.

"Are the things they say about true? Franklin inquired further. "That he helps people out of trouble and takes no money for his services?"

"So they tell me," the other replied.

Then in the fashion of cab-drivers the world over, he launched into the beginning of a windy discussion of all he knew on the subject.

"I read where this Doc Savage ..."

Redheaded Tom Franklin cut him off.

"How can I contact this Savage?"

"Well," the driver told him, "I don't exactly know now ... Wait a minute! This Doc Savage has five(5) friends who help him out. Each of them is supposedly the greatest brains in their fields. Here! Look at this."

He passed back a folded newspaper that he had been reading between fares.

Tom Franklin took the sheet with unconcealed avidness. His eyes coursed down the columns of type like a man quenching a long thirst.

"What a break!" he exploded as his **blue** orbs alighted on a headline.

**Doc Savage Aide Renwick
Announces Hydroelectric Project Near Completion**

He scanned the article. It was a dry summation of the expected completion of a hydroelectric dam project which would furnish electricity to a considerable portion of South Africa. The construction of this dam was winding up and dedication would be 1 week hence.

There was a quote by a Colonel John Renwick to the effect that he was quite pleased that the dam would be finished on schedule inasmuch as he had some financial interest in the project.

The staid style of reporting which characterized the article livened up considerably in its final paragraphs with the legendary **Doc Savage** about whom the scribe made fantastic claims.

"Take me to where they are working on this dam," Tom Franklin ordered.

The hackney spun around and set a course due west past Table Mountain and away from the city.

They drove along dirt roads for the better part of 2 hours. It was early June. Which meant that Winter was approaching in this part of the World. But the Winter rains were still weeks away.

The machine pulled along a great worm of dust in its wake. The vineyards and sheep farms near Cape Town gave way to open hills and rock outcroppings. Grasses and brush covered the hills. Much of it was a plant not unlike the American chaparral called *fynbos*. There were occasional pine trees. But nothing resembling a jungle as might be expected in Africa.

Once they did pass a grazing zebra. In the distance, mountains rose blue against an azure sky.

Not long after, they drew to a halt in the shadow of a massive buttress of concrete and steel. This was the hydroelectric dam designed to provide abundant electrical energy to the provinces surrounding Cape Town.

It was an active place. Earth-moving equipment rattled and worked busily.

"That'll be 12 rand," the driver informed Tom Franklin. (A "rand" about equaled a U.S. Dollar \$.)

"I don't have any money with me," Franklin explained. "But I'm sure Mr. Renwick will be glad to pay the fare."

The driver cast a bilious eye upon his flame-haired passenger. Especially after the latter emerged from the rear and presented the entire spectacle of his odd garments. But he followed his strange passenger nevertheless.

Tom Franklin legged over to a group of men who were pouring over a set of blueprints. The individual holding the prints towered head-and-shoulders above his fellows and attracted notice instantly.

He stood well over 6 feet in height with a steel protective helmet shading his head. **He was an elephant of a man!** His broad shoulders, thick arms, and big-boned knobby construction attested to his ruggedness. That "knobbiness" was particularly evident in the big man's fists.

They were like giant mauls those **fists**. Their size made the copious blueprints seem like a tabloid newspaper by comparison.

Looking at those **fists**, Franklin mentally calculated that each of them would weigh a quart in liquid measure.

"Whew! What mitts!" he exclaimed, lapsing into vernacular speech.

The giant of a man happened then to turn his head in Franklin's direction, affording a clear view of his face. He possessed a long horse-like countenance on which rode an expression of profound gloom as if he were planning a funeral. His mouth was a thin line of disapproval.

Tom Franklin recognized the man from the newspaper description. It was Colonel John "Renny" Renwick, the Doc Savage assistant.

Franklin started forward, yelling and flapping his bare arms.

"Colonel Renwick! I'm Tom Franklin!"

Coincident with that shout, a tractor gave a snort like an enraged water buffalo, drowning out the words.

Renny Renwick caught sight of the strangely costumed man anyway and said "**Holy Cow!**" His bellow caused an antelope to start 2 miles away so loud was it.

He lumbered forward. Then all hell broke loose!

A sedan tore down the road ... braked violently ... and skewed to a halt. Doors popped open. Men boiled out led by Blackbird Hinton and King Hancock.

They brandished weapons and used them indiscriminately. Lead stormed! Construction workers dived for cover.

Redheaded Tom Franklin pitched behind a Caterpillar tractor. The cab driver -- less swift -- folded in the middle as a machine-gun raked him. He hit the ground leaking **crimson** fluid from mouth, nose, and belly.

"Holy cow!" big Renny Renwick boomed again.

Around him, men had scattered. He dropped the blueprints in his massive **hands** and got behind shelter.

A grim silence descended upon the construction site. Men crouched fearfully behind every available object. The gunmen advanced, their weapons raised.

"Take it easy!" Blackbird Hinton shouted to all concerned. "We only want the **red-haired** guy!"

They made for the tractor behind which Franklin was ensconced.

Peering through the Cat's treads, Franklin recognized his assailants. "Must have followed me somehow," he grated.

He fumbled in his costume and extracted the bamboo tube. Behind him, the big-**fisted** engineer was in the act of crawling toward an earthmover.

Franklin tossed the bamboo length so that it hit near Renwick's face. A mallet-like **fist** closed up it.

Renny looked up and saw Franklin mouth the words: *"Important. For Doc Savage!"*

The giant engineer nodded and snaked toward the earthmover.

Blackbird Hinton's men then surrounded Franklin's tractor.

"Get up, Red," Blackbird ordered.

He was still dressed like an exceedingly-**black** raven (or a crow). His eyes were ebony pinpoints of menace. But Tom Franklin found the muzzle of his pistol more compelling. He found his feet.

"Let's go," Blackbird gritted.

In a mass, the gunmen marched their prisoner to the waiting machine while others of their group stood with weapons trained on the project grounds. No one moved except the dying hackman who was crying in his native language (Afrikaans). His screams sent up a fine **scarlet** spray.

Franklin was pushed roughly into the sedan. The guards backed off ...

... then snapped alert when an earthmover suddenly grunted into life and lunged toward them.

"Get that one!" Blackbird ordered.

Renny Renwick worked the earthmover's control levers. The big steel shield lifted up. Lead hammered at it. But the steel turned the slugs, protecting him. Grunting and spewing diesel smoke, the earthmover bore down on the sedan.

Two of the attackers whipped off to one side, angling for a clear shot.

Renny jockeyed the earthmover about. The shield scooped up more bullets.

"Blast it!" Blackbird cursed from the sedan.

"Get that big scut!" he ordered his men

They deployed. Some with high-powered rifles; others with machine-guns.

The earthmover was quickly surrounds. Renny Renwick was brave. But he was also no fool.

"You got me" he rumbled, sounding like a disturbed lion roaring in a drum.

The big engineer was motioned off the machine and clubbed unconscious under King Hancock's direction. A few lusty kicks were applied to his ribs after he was prone. Satisfied, the Blackbird crew prepared to depart.

It was King Hancock who noticed the bamboo tube in the bony monstrosity that was Renny's **fist**. He stooped and picked it up. More on a hunch than for any other reason.

"Let's get away from here," Hancock said tersely.

The entire contingent piled into the sedan or trod the running boards.

They betook themselves away.

"You are a funny one, you are," Blackbird Hinton grated.

He was seated in the rear of the traveling sedan. His hands were tangled up in Tom Franklin's shirt front. (Or what would have been his shirt front had he been normally attired.)

"Why'd you light out for the dam project?"

Franklin said: "Go to Hell!"

He set himself for the blow. And it came.

Blackbird slashed the snout of his pistol across Franklin's face.

In spite of the gun, the **redhead** almost jumped the crow-like man. He subsided after getting a closer look at the pistol's maw.

"Smart guy, eh?" Blackbird sneered. "But not smart enough, bucko. That stunt of yours back on the *Mighty* wasn't good enough. We heard over the radio that you'd been picked up. We just got to Cape Town ahead of you. Didn't know we had a seaplane hidden in that ark of ours, did you? Imagine our surprise when the *Brisbane* docked and you weren't on it. But we nosed around a bit and found a taxi

driver who had seen you go off in a hack belongin' to a mate of his. That was all the wake we needed to find you again."

Tom Franklin said a resolute nothing.

Not long after, the sedan rolled to a stop at a white farmhouse on the outskirts of Cape Town. It was a squat high-gabled dwelling of the Cape Dutch style common to the region.

The crew entered. Men with guns lounged in a simple parlor. They were guarding the black-haired, sloe-eyed girl who had been a passenger on the **gilded** monoplane.

She started to her feet at the sight of the **red-haired** man but was shoved back into her chair.

Franklin began to speak words in an unknown language. He was promptly knocked down for his pains.

Preening himself in characteristic fashion, Blackbird Hinton straddled Franklin's prone form. He slapped his spike-nosed pistol against a meaty palm.

"You're goin' to tell us all about that radio message you tried to send," he announced meaningfully.

"You might want to take a look at this first, Cap'n," King Hancock inserted.

He passed the bamboo tube to his **black**-clad skipper.

"What's this?" Blackbird wanted to know.

"I found it in that big troublemaker's hand. Didn't think much of it at first. But look at the seal."

Blackbird looked. At one end of the tube in **blue** was the imprint of a **twisting serpent**.

"That design was all over that **gold**-plated plane," Hancock said unnecessarily.

Blackbird shoved 2 fingers into the tube's open end and pulled out a long role of **blue** paper. He examined this.

"Hell! It looks like a bloody hunk of blueprint!" he bellowed.

Tom Franklin had been watching the proceeding with a look of gray horror on his face. He emitted a *strangling* noise.

"I can't read this. What's it say?" Blackbird demanded.

Franklin regarded the crow-like man with frosty-**blue** eyes. His mouth was a line.

"You passed this to that big-**fisted** lubber, didn't you?"

King Hancock put in a thought.

"Maybe this is some kind of **treasure map**! It might tell us where we can find more of that **gold**."

Pocketing his pistol, Blackbird reached down and lifted the **redhead** to his feet by main strength.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "You're goin' to answer some questions before this fine day is through! What about this blueprint? What's it mean?"

"I don't know," Franklin vouchsafed. "I never saw it before in my life."

A man stepped forward then.

"Let me handle this, Skipper."

He drove the butt of his rifle into the flame-haired man's kidneys where it would cause excruciating pain. Franklin dropped in a groaning heap.

Other men came forward at Blackbird's signal. Blows rained! A feminine voice screeched. 2 men had to hold the girl down.

When the assailants stepped back, Tom Franklin resembled an old rag doll that had been spattered with **red** paint.

"Let's start with that radio message then," Blackbird demanded. "Who did you sent it to?"

Tom Franklin spit out blood and a tooth. The latter clicked against Blackbird's shoe.

The evil skipper gave the signal for his crew to resume their work.

"N-no!" Franklin pleaded. "No more! I-I sent that message to New York. To **Doc Savage**."

"Hell's Bells!" a man swore explosively. "Now we're in for it!"

"Shut up!" Blackbird spat. "That message had to be relayed through a Cape Town station. I stopped him before he could finish it. So they may not have sent it on."

He turned on the others.

"Two of you come with me. Hancock ...!"

"Aye sir?" the dapper diamond smuggler said.

"You guard these two until we get back.

With two of his worthies in tow, Blackbird quitted the farmhouse.

Sometime later, an operator in the Cape Town telegraph station was startled when 3 men burst into his office with drawn guns.

One of them -- a short **raven**-hued individual -- pressed the snout of his spiky pistol to the operator's nose.

"This won't go off if you do like I say," Blackbird Hinton advised.

"R-right," the operator stammered.

"Where are your message files?" Blackbird demanded. "I want to see copies of every message that went through this office in the last 24 hours."

"Over there."

With a shaking digit, the operator indicated a wooden box in which reposed a stack of yellow flimsies.

The 2 crewmen stood guard over the terrified operator while Blackbird ransacked the message copies.

"Damn the luck!" he cursed at length. "It went through to New York all right."

Blackbird considered.

"Maybe we can still head this thing off. Take care of that guy."

The radio operator fainted, however, thus making further violence on his person unnecessary.

III -- Radio Trap

Colonel John "Renny" Renwick, M.S.C.E., D.S.C., C.M.H. -- as his name appeared on the roster of the International Society of Master Engineers -- was noted for several things. His worldwide reputation as one of the greatest living civil engineers was just one of them.

His huge **fists** and perpetual look of utter gloom (he was, for some reason, happiest when he looked the saddest) were two more of his trademarks.

But it was his status as an aide to the fabulous personage **Doc Savage** that was perhaps the most amazing thing about him.

Only Five individuals on the face of the Earth had that honor. And each of them was a recognized master in his chosen field. Too, each of them chose to put aside his own career when necessary to follow the **Bronze Man** in his work.

This meant that Renny Renwick was a lover of **adventure** because where Doc Savage went, **excitement** was certain to be found. This also meant that Renny was not exactly deficient in what is commonly referred to as "gray matter".

Renny held evidence of his quick thinking in one big beet-colored **hand** as he stood in the shadow of the massive hydroelectric dam. It was a stiff roll of parchment which the giant engineer was in the process of unraveling. The parchment had nestled -- until recently -- in the bamboo cylinder given him by the oddly-garbed man with the flaming hair.

Renny had palmed this, **substituting a strip of blueprint** before he had gone into action with the earthmover. It was a simple precaution. But it worked.

When he regained consciousness, he discovered the bamboo tube to be missing. But the scroll was secure under his discarded steel helmet.

Renny examined the parchment scroll. It was minutely inscribed with a strange script. The big engineer's work had taken him all over the Glove and he was familiar with many languages. But the odd script baffled him.

"Strangest dang writing I ever saw," he muttered.

*Even his mutter was **loud**.*

"Wonder what this thing means ..."

All around him, the camp was pulling itself together. Renny shook off solicitous question regarding the state of his injured head with a growled "What happened?"

He was informed that the strangely-garbed redhead had been abducted by the raiders and that the unfortunate taxi-driver had died. There were no other casualties. "We called the authorities as soon as the smoke cleared" he was told.

Renny nodded wordlessly, his eyes still on the baffling script. His face looked like the popular conception of Old Man Prohibition. Conversely, this meant that he was elated.

The business of the costumed man; his pursuers, and the parchment scroll inscribed with an unknown language meant excitement to the big-fisted engineer.

"Doc oughta know about this," he decided.

Suiting words to action, he headed for his office which was situated in a rude wooden structure. The door was closed but not locked. It was a stout door being hewn of hard native ironwood.

Without breaking stride, Renny struck the panel a mighty **blow!** It flew a full 10 feet across the office.

It was a peculiarity of Renny Renwick that he enjoyed knocking the panels out of doors. He often boasted that the door hadn't been constructed that could withstand his **fists**. In this case, the door was all of a piece and -- there being no panel to pop loose -- gave at its hinges.

There was a radio in his office used to communicate with the outside World. It was still there. But someone had taken a hammer to it. Vacuum tubes, coils, and other paraphernalia littered the small office.

A telephone (it was one of two at the site) had been ripped loose as well. One of the raiders had evidently found his way to the office in the course of the excitement.

A subordinate popped his head in the open door.

"I forgot to tell you that one of them sneaked in here."

He saw the remains.

"They got the radio, eh?"

Renny grunted. His dark eyes were narrow.

"The only other big set in the area is in Cape Town," the other offered. "Want an auto?"

"yeah," Renny rumbled, rolling up the parchment and slipping it into his belt. "I'll drive it myself."

The subordinate ran off to commandeer a machine.

Renny waited in his office. He paced like a caged lion clutching-and-unclutching his great **fists** nervously. They resembled blocks of bone-and-gristle encased in rhinoceros hid.

Once, he stopped and banged those monster **fists** together! They produced a sound not unlike 2 bricks being clapped together.

It was not often in recent times that Renny Renwick actually practiced his chosen profession. He preferred the companionship of Doc Savage to toiling at projects such as this hydroelectric dam.

The high fees that he charged when he did work had made him a wealthy man. He could easily afford not to work. It just happened that this current undertaking was one in which he personally had a vested financial interest. And so the big engineer had come to South Africa to supervise the finishing touches to the project.

But several weeks of this had begun to wear on him. In short, he craved **Action**. The kind only association with Doc Savage provided.

The fact that he was now unable to contact his leader made him impatient.

It was this preoccupation -- as well as the fact that there was no door to be opened -- which prevented Renny from hearing the skulker enter his office.

The intruder had the muzzle of a gun pressed against his spine -- where instantaneous death would result should the weapon discharge -- before the big-**fisted** engineer became cognizant that he was no longer alone.

A cool cultured voice told him: "You cannot be anyone other than Renny Renwick. And you won't be anything except dead if you hesitate to place your hands where they will do the least good."

Another man might have jumped at the sudden voice. But Renny did not seem alarmed.

He said "Holy cow!" (it was his pet expression) and raised his massive hands level with his head. The latter looked ridiculously small as a result. Like the head of a missionary is supposed to look after it has been shrunk by headhunters. Renny's **fists** equaled his head in size.

That illusion did not give King Hancock pause for it was the dapper crook who had gotten the drop on the huge engineer. Hancock was a cook customer.

"Don't make a move," he ordered.

He was still attired in his long Prince Albert coat. A soft gray hat rested on his head.

"It's a good think I learned to think for myself," he remarked. "Otherwise who else would there be to pick up the Captain's marbles for him? When Blackbird pulled that piece of blueprint out of that bamboo stick he took from you, it occurred to me that a fast one might have been pulled. And I certainly can't let anyone make a fool out of my Captain now can I!"

The natty diamond smuggler spied the stiff scroll shoved in the big engineer's belt. He reached for it, still keeping his gun (it was a tiny pearl-handled .22) nuzzling Renny's spine.

Renny Renwick stood 64" tall and weighed 250 pounds of solid knobby muscle. His arms and legs were remindful of long kegs of thew. His feet -- like his fists -- were disproportionately large. He was a loose, clumsy-looking individual. Such men are usually uncoordinated.

It happed that when Renny was a youth, his father had hired a retired boxer to train him. The old fighter had done a remarkable job. It was not well known, but Renny Renwick was one of the most accomplished boxers in the World despite the fact that he had never fought professionally.

The reason that his father had put his son through that training was not to teach him to defend himself. Even as a youth, his **fists** had been awesome. But rather to instill speed and lightning reflexes. The old pugilist had done an exemplary job there too.

He showed his skill now.

As King Hancock reached around Renny's huge bulk for the scroll, the engineer pivoted and lashed out with his **fists**. One knocked the diminutive automatic from the dapper crook's hand while the other - still raised -- levered down in a nail-driving fashion. King Hancock caved to the floor.

Renny scooped up the gun in one paw. He retrieved the parchment next.

"That'll teach you to go up against your betters," he told the prostrate crooks.

Hancock -- stunned but conscious -- raised himself a little and shook his head to clear it. The suddenness with which he ceased that activity indicated that the head-shaking was *painful* in the extreme.

Renny's automobile ground to a halt outside the office and a man slid from the driver's seat.

"Auto's here, Mr. Renwick," he called.

At those words, King Hancock bounced erect and nimbly avoided Renny's lunge. One leap put him in the open machine. He scrambled for the wheel.

"Holy cow! A jumping jack!" Renny roared.

He leaped himself but landed in the dirt where the car had been.

He got to his feet. He still had Hancock's pistol. He brought this level and fumbled with it for several seconds. It was a vest-pocket weapon. Consequently, his **fist** swallowed it.

The trigger guard proved to be too small to admit his finger. He threw it away and disgust and legged for another machine.

By the time his big hands were wrapped around the steering wheel of another car, the fleeing machine had gotten a good start in the apparent direction of Cape Town. Renny set off in pursuit anyway.

The giant engineer still had the parchment scroll with him. He rolled it tightly and stowed it between the cushions of his auto seat for safekeeping.

The roads leading to Cape Town are no highways. They wind like black ribbons through vineyards and sheep farms ... past Devil's Peak ... and on toward the city. This meant that a car had to cover roughly 2 miles-or-more for ever mile of distance "as the crow flies".

It also meant that it was possible for a canny driver to keep a car traveling in front of him in sight as the roads twisted and turned almost in on themselves.

Having sighted the fleeing vehicle from a rise, Renny decided to pace the King Hancock car in the hopes that it would lead him eventually to the marauders who had killed the taxi driver and kidnapped the owner of the parchment scroll.

The trail led to downtown Cape Town. There, Renny was forced to close the gap between vehicles for fear of losing his quarry.

The Hancock machine -- possibly lulled by the lack of visible pursuit during the long drive -- settled down to a reasonable speed. Renny matched that pace until the car came to a rest on Adderly Street near the railroad station.

Looking only slightly ruffled, dapper King Hancock trotted into a building. He did not look behind him.

Renny parked well behind. Cautiously he followed on foot. He recognized the building as the Cape Town radio station.

"Probably going to send a message to his chief," Renny concluded. "I got him now!"

He went in boldly. He found his way to the sending office.

He was set upon at once!

There were men on either side of the door. One made the mistake of coming at him with a liver-hued blackjack. He swung it.

Renny dodged the descending implement. He brought a big **fist** around in a backhand swing. It drove the air out of the blackjack wielder's lungs as it sank into his middle. Renny felt his knuckles contact the man's spine. The latter went down, a little green.

Off to one side, Blackbird Hinton yelled: "Pile on him! Don't just stand there! He might have a blasted gun!"

The men jumped. They were only two(2) of them. But they were big brawny fellows. One wrapped himself around Renny's waist and held on for dear life. The other -- picking himself off the floor -- came up with his blackjack.

Renny roared! He thrashed about! The man leeching to his waist impeded his movements.

Renny banded a huge **hand** around the other's neck while he attempted to beat off the blackjack wielder.

Preening himself and hurling lusty oaths, Blackbird Hinton watched. King Hancock held back hesitantly. The memory of the big engineer's powerful **fists** was clear in his mind.

To the onlookers, the fight seemed to last an eternity. But it actually occupied but 4 minutes of violent struggle. The tenaciousness with which the two Blackbird crewmen clung to the giant engineer's frame made it all-but-impossible for him to swing his beam-like arms.

Each time he struck with a fist, the blackjack wielder caught him painfully on the knuckles. Those split and ran **red**. Renny bellowed like a wounded grizzly.

The fight ended when the man clinging to Renny bit him on the arm. This distracted the huge engineer long enough for the other to step back and let fly with his blackjack. The latter worthier threw the sap like a knife. It caught the big fighter on the back of his pomade-smeared skull and he went down heavily.

"That settles his hash," Blackbird said grimly.

He turned to his First Mate.

"Why'd you bring him here?"

King Hancock proceeded to explain his hunch about the substitute blueprint and the aftermath of his visit to the hydroelectric project.

"I knew he would follow me," Hancock concluded, "so I led him here. We took him before. So why not again?"

"He must have that treasure map -- or whatever was in that bamboo thing -- on him," Blackbird reasoned. "Search him!"

They did. But without success.

"He's clean," one reported. "Not even a gat."

"He must have left it behind," natty King Hancock decided. "We should go back and get it. That **red-haired** devil obviously was attempting to get whatever was in that tube to **Doc Savage**."

"How do you figure that?" Blackbird wanted to know.

This big lug is Renny Renwick. One of Doc Savage's men."

"That cinches it!" Blackbird gritted. "It's got to be a **treasure map**! But we'll go after it later. First, we got something more important to take care of. We can't make another move until this Doc Savage angle is scuttled."

He turned to his men.

"Get that guy and drag him behind the counter with that radio operator."

The men -- with considerable grunting effort -- dragged the huge engineer out of sight.

"Let's see what we can do about Doc Savage," Blackbird said as he strode to the sending set.

King Hancock followed. "Bull?" he asked.

"Bull," the **crow**-like skipper replied evenly.

The voice -- even distorted by the *static*-filled expanse of the Atlantic Ocean -- was a deep and obviously *powerful* one.

"*Bull here*," the voice rumbled. "*What's up?*"

"Trouble. With bells on," Blackbird said into the microphone. "We've run into something. Maybe something big."

"*Diamonds?*" the voice wanted to know.

"Bigger than diamonds. But there's one hitch ..."

"*Yeah?*" The voice sounded interested.

Blackbird hesitated.

"**Doc Savage**," he said at length.

There was a pause during which only hissing *static* could be heard over the loudspeaker.

Presently, the deep formidable voice said: "*I can handle Doc Savage.*"

"You don't have to 'handle' him," Blackbird told him. "Just see that he doesn't get a radiogram message from over here. Got that? No messages are to reach him.

"*Got it*," the man called 'Bull' said.

They broke the connection.

Blackbird ran his hands down his black coat front. The palms left a slight *residue* of moisture on the material.

"All blasted right," he said at length. "Let's get this oversized clown and head back to the hideout. We're goin' to have a nice little confabulation session."

IV -- Bull Pizano

The radiogram arrived at the New York *Headquarters* of Doc Savage before noon. A smartly-uniformed messenger boy named Morris O. Jones carried it to the imposing skyscraper which housed the **Bronze Man**.

Like most New Yorkers, Morris knew that the legendary *Man of Bronze* lived on the 86th floor of Manhattan's tallest building. But few had ever seen Doc Savage personally because the latter shunned publicity.

Thus Jones was quite excited as he pushed his way across the ornate lobby toward the **Bronze Man's** private lift.

The elevator bore the messenger up 86 floors without stopping. He found himself at one end of a long wide corridor, tastefully decorated. There were several doors. But only one -- at the far end -- showed any lettering. With radiogram in hand, Jones went to this door.

The door was plain but of rich **bronze**. On this portal in letters of slightly *darker* bronze was a name:

Clark Savage, Jr.

It was Doc Savage's given name.

"Boy oh boy!" Morris O. Jones enthused. "Here's my big chance! Maybe I can wrangle an autograph from this guy."

There was neither knob nor bell. So the messenger <knocked>.

The door promptly opened and the messenger got the shock of his young life.

The personage who stood in the doorway was no taller than Jones himself (who stood 5'6"). Yet he seemed, somehow, to tower over him like a giant. This illusion of size had to do with the fact that he filled the doorway. Which made him as wide as he was tall.

Moreover, the arms of this astounding individual dangled well below his knees. He possessed a scarred face in which the nose had been mashed flat. His hair grew back from his eyebrows. There was a bullet hole in one ear.

His eyes were tiny and pig-like resembling stars sunk in pits of gristle. His mouth was so wide as to bring to mind a bullfrog. His entire body, furthermore, was covered with **red** hair not unlike rusty shingle nails.

The entire effect was that of a pleasantly homely gorilla.

When this apparition asked Morris O. Jones "Somethin' I can do for you, pal?" in a squeaky childlike voice, the latter gave a start and tried to run away.

A long furry beam of an arm collared Jones and lifted him off the floor. His feet made running motions against empty air.

"Somethin' I can do for you?" the ape-like one repeated.

The messenger -- at a complete loss for words -- waved the radiogram frantically. The other took it and carried them both into a large **Reception** room.

A third individual sat behind an immense inlaid desk of Oriental design within.

"What seems to be the trouble, Monk?" he asked in pear-shaped tones.

"This guy is actin' awful suspicious, Ham," the simian man growled.

The one called "Ham" rose from behind the massive desk. He was a striking figure himself. Especially in contrast to the man he addressed as "Monk".

He was tall, quite slender, and elegantly decked out in a morning coat. He waved a neat black cane which came apart in his hands to reveal that it was in reality a **sword-cane** with a wicked-looking blade.

He gestured with the point of the weapon.

"By Jove," Ham said. "He appears to be only a messenger by."

"Yeah. But when I asked him his business, he tried to scram," Monk put in.

Meanwhile, Hones continued to flail helplessly in the grip of the apish Monk.

"You hairy mistake!" Ham said sharply. "He probably is a messenger boy! No doubt your striking 'good looks' nearly gave him a heart attack. Put him down this instant!"

Grumbling, the hairy Monk deposited Jones on the rug.

"Don't give me orders, shyster. You ain't big enough. Besides, you know how many times someone's tried to kill Doc by sneakin' up here in disguise."

Ham sniffed and addressed the frightened messenger who was looking around the **Reception** room with ill-disguised wonder.

"My name is Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. I'm an associate of Doc Savage and ..."

"He's just 'Ham' to the rest of us," Monk inserted.

Ham Brooks **reddened** slightly and continued.

"Now, my good man, just what is your business here?"

His tones were remarkably well-modulated and had the effect of quieting the scared messenger's nerves. His handsome face with its high wide forehead, mobile orator's mouth, and dark expressive eyes denoted great intelligence and sympathy.

"I'm Morris O. Jones," the messenger announced proudly, straightening his rumpled **green** uniform. "I got a radiogram for Doc Savage ... Or I had until this ... this *thing* took it away from me."

He indicated gorilla-like Monk.

Ham laughed aloud!

"You'll have to excuse my associate. He was raised in a hen house and never got over it."

"How would you like me to twist that sword of yours into a forget-me-not around your neck, ambulance chaser!" Monk rumbled, his voice losing its childish squeak.

Sensing imminent violence, Morris O. Jones eyed the open door and entertained thoughts of flight.

"Don't worry about Monk here," Ham inserted for Jones' benefit.

His sword-cane licked out and speared the radiogram in Monk's huge paw. The latter bellowed rage gut curiously made no move toward the dapper Ham.

"You see?" Ham said quietly. "Harmless."

He calmly plucked the radiogram from the blade.

"Unfortunately, Doc Savage is not here at present. But I'll take this."

He flipped a coin in Jones' direction.

"You mean I'm not going to get to see Doc Savage?" Jones asked plaintively.

His eyes swept about the **Reception** area with its inlaid desk, massive leather chairs, and -- in one corner -- man-sized safe of antiquated design. These were the principal articles of furniture in the room.

"I'm afraid not," Ham said in a Harvard *accent*.

And he was a Harvard man. In fact, he was their star alumnus in the legal profession because Ham Brooks was one of the world's greatest lawyers.

He was also -- he liked to believe -- one of the best-dressed men in the World. He always dressed at the height of sartorial splendor. It was said of him that tailors would follow him down the street just to see how good clothes should be worn. The Harvard *accent* was something he affected in his calmer moments.

"You see," he was saying, "Doc Savage is out of the Country at the moment. Not even we -- his associates -- know where to find him.

"This was precisely true.

*Currently, Doc Savage was in retreat in his **Fortress of Solitude**. It was an unknown place situated on a rocky isle somewhere in the Arctic.*

*There in a laboratory more complete than any in existence (more complete even than the **Lab** adjoining this **Reception** room), Doc Savage periodically retired to brush up on the latest scientific developments or to perfect some new marvel in Medicine, Engineering, Chemistry, or any of the other fields in which he was versed which would be a boon for Mankind.*

*During these sojourns, no one could reach the **Man of Bronze**. Not even by radio. Because he required uninterrupted concentration, not even his men knew its exact location or what it looked like. To all others, the very existence of the strange **Fortress** was unknown.*

Morris O. Jones looked disappointed.

"Nuts!" he complained. "My one chance to actually meet Doc Savage and I get waylaid by a baboon instead!"

"Watch it, short stuff," Monk warned. "I might take a notion to bounce you out of here."

Ham chuckled to see the power chemist (that was Monk's area of expertise) being ragged by this pip-squeak of a messenger boy.

"Go take your face for a walk," Jones retorted. "The air might do it some good. It sure can't hurt it any!"

He leaped out the door one step ahead of the hairy Monk. The big chemist collided with the slammed portal and bounced off it.

Ham Brooks convulsed with mirth.

"The great Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair. Outwitted by a messenger boy!" he chortled.

Monk stopped the merriment with a well-placed kick to Ham's correctly pressed backside causing the dapper lawyer to upset.

"Let's see you do as well, fashion plate!" Monk roared.

Ham sprang to his feet. His ever-present sword-cane (he never went anywhere without it) began describing flashing circles in the air. Monk squared off, his long arms widespread like those of a wrestler. This time, the pair did look as if they were about to commit mutual mayhem.

In truth, they were the best of friends. And each would have willingly laid down his life for the other.

Their relationship went back to the Great War (WWI) where they had met. (In fact, Doc Savage and all his men had initially met. **Read "Escape from Loki (#183).**)

Ham's quick thinking had saved regiments and a brigadier generalship had been his reward. Monk was the terror of the battlefields of France and had once pulled up several rods of German barbed-wire entanglement single-handedly.

It was in France that their supposed enmity (it was an act, really) had begun.

As a joke, Ham Brooks had taught Monk Mayfair some French words. Supposedly the proper flattery for a French general. The latter used those words ...

... with the result that he was clapped in the guardhouse for a spell!

A few days later, Ham was mysteriously haled up on a charge of stealing hams. Despite his lawyerly skills, he was convicted in the first trial. He earned his nickname (which he detested!) as a result of the incident. He was never able to prove that Monk Mayfair had framed him. Which rankled him to no end.

Ever since that time, they had repeatedly promised to kill one another.

As proof that their seeming hatred was a charade, when the telephone rang they instantly dropped their menacing poses and raced each other to the instrument. Monk won.

"Doc Savage headquarters," he squeaked.

"*I wanna talk wit' Doc Savage,*" a deep gravelly voice said over the wire.

"He's not here right now. This is Monk Mayfair. Want to leave a message?"

"*I'm callin' about a message I sent him,*" the voice rasped. "*Did he get it yet?*"

"No. But he will when he returns," Monk assured the caller.

"*It may be too late by dat time,*" the other protested. "*Lissen! Can you come over to my place wit' dat message? It's a matter of life an' death.*"

Monk thought a moment.

The voice sounded suspicious. The request to come with message-in-hand, too, had all the earmarks of a trap.

But it was a fact that people in trouble came to Doc Savage when recognized authorities were powerless to assist them. This was the **Bronze Man**'s chosen work for which he accepted no pay.

Either way, it probably meant action. And Monk Mayfair craved ***action!***

"Give me your address," the simian chemist said.

He scribbled something on a notepad.

"I'll be there in 15 minutes."

He broke the connection.

All through this exchange, the dapper Ham had been an avid listener, his black eyes aglow with interest. But Monk had kept his back to the slender lawyer, frustrating the latter's eavesdropping somewhat.

"What was that about?" Ham demanded.

Monk kept a straight face.

"Nuthin' much. My secretary was just remindin' me of somethin' I forgot to do."

Monk -- who maintained a luxurious penthouse apartment on Wall Street -- employed a secretary to manage his affairs. She was, he was wont to boast, the prettiest secretary in New York. And this was like true. Monk Mayfair was a connoisseur of feminine pulchritude.

Ham snorted! He was suspicious.

But then, he was always suspicious. Especially when it involved Monk.

"Here, Habeas!" Monk called.

From another room -- the **Library** (the 86th floor consisted of a **Laboratory**, **Library**, and **Reception**-room arrangement) -- a remarkable animal trotted.

It was a scrawny specimen of the porker family possessing a razor back, a long inquisitive snout, doglike legs, and ears that could double for wings.

The pig brushed Ham Brooks' immaculate pants leg in passing. With the result that the aristocratic attorney took a swipe at the shoat with his sheathed cane.

"Someday I'm going to make breakfast bacon out of that hog!" he threatened.

Blissfully aware that he was cheating Ham out of possible excitement, Monk only said: "Let's go, Habeas."

He picked the pig up by one winglike ear.

"If I leave you behind, you might get stolen by some dishonest person."

Monk quitted the room and took Doc Savage's private speed elevator to their secret basement garage. The lift was notable (or notorious) for its fast rate-of-travel. He left the car descend at top speed ...

... with the result that he was thrown to his knees when he reached the basement. Monk loved that elevator!

In the garage, he made his way to a gaudy battered coupe in which he promptly roared off.

The apish chemist smiled broadly as he drove. He was one of the World's greatest industrial chemists (which made him a near-genius). But he hardly looked or acted the part. His forehead, in fact,

was barely an inch high and gave the impression that his nubbin of a head contained only a spoonful of brains.

His pet pig Habeas Corpus (so named to annoy the sensitive lawyer Ham Brooks) added to Monk's comical demeanor.

But these things were deceptive. Monk Mayfair was not only intelligent but also resourceful. And he had to be in order to have been included in Doc Savage's tiny hand. The fact that he resembled (in looks and disposition) a trained ape was but an accident of Life.

He was actually proud of his ugliness. It was his boast (and there was some doubt on the matter inasmuch as Monk was not exactly addicted to the truth) that he came into the world -- unlike other children -- as fuzzy as a baboon. Monk's visage, he discovered, affected women in a remarkably positive fashion. So he had long ago decided it was a definite asset.

Habeas Corpus -- who had been picked up in the course of an Arabian adventure (*read "The Phantom City(#010)"*) -- was also not what it seemed. It was smarter than most dogs -- a faculty that Monk made full use of. He spent much of his spare time training the pig to do tricks. Some of these were gags aimed at getting Ham Brooks' goat. But others had actually ended up saving the lives of Doc Savage and his men during past trouble.

Monk chuckled to himself as he drove. "This is one time we really put one over on that shyster. Right, Habeas?"

The shoat sat on the passenger seat with his head out the window like a dog, its ears flapping in the wind.

It seemed to say: *"Serves that ambulance chaser right."*

Monk laughed. "You said it, hog!"

He was an expert ventriloquist and enjoyed putting disparaging comments about his rival in the pig's mouth.

All in all, Monk Mayfair was easily the most unusual of Doc Savage's five(5) aides of whom Ham Brooks and Renny Renwick were 2 others. The remainder -- like Renny -- were both out of the country presently.

William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn -- the expert on archaeology and geology -- was at the moment in London where he was filling a special lecture engagement at a famous English university.

Major Thomas J. "Long Tom" Roberts -- the electrical wizard -- was in Europe working on a device which had developed into a personal mania with him. It was an ultrasonic ray which could kill insects within its range. When perfected, it would be of inestimable value to farmers as well as probably kick the legs out from under the pesticide industry.

These men -- like all of the Doc Savage's associates -- were the greatest grains in their respective fields. But it was a measure of the **Bronze Man's** vast prowess that all of them bowed to the superior knowledge of their Leader.

If any action impended, Monk reflected, Renny, Johnny, and Long Tom would probably miss it.

But he was no clairvoyant. So he had no way of knowing that trouble involving Renny Renwick was already brewing.

The address given to Monk over the phone by the gravelly voice was in Queens, a borough of New York.

He pulled up before a white-frame residence with blue trim. It was deceptively peaceful. Somewhere birds were winging. There were even a few Spring flowers in the front yard and a white picket fence.

"Stay here, Habeas," Monk directed.

The pig settled back on the seat cushions.

The homely chemist ambled for the front door of the house as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Monk Mayfair was a canny soul. But there wasn't a cautious bone in his body. He was fully aware that he might be walking into a trap of some kind. In his heart, he half hoped that he was. Because that would mean *action!*

His love of *excitement* sometimes got in the way of his better judgment.

This was one such time.

Monk <knoocked> on the door. It fell open of its own accord.

Hearing no sound, he stepped in.

A baseball bat collided with his nubbin of a head!

Monk was not aware that it was a baseball bat because it knocked him flat. he was not rendered unconscious, however. Monk Mayfair possessed a thick skull.

He endeavored to get up. A foot planted itself on the small of his back and exerted force.

Monk -- to his complete bewilderment -- found that he could not rise! "Blazes!" he croaked.

He weighed 260 pounds, none of it fat. Yet someone was holding him down with the pressure of only one foot!

"Don't bother, smart guy," a deep powerful voice said above him.

Monk recognized the voice. It was the same one that had called him minus the gravel. Blackbird Hinton would have recognized that voice too.

"I don't wanna hoit you again," it said. *The voice had, if anything, a distinctive Bronx accent.*

Monk strained upwards. A baseball touched his nose by way of warning.

"You the guy that called me?" Monk wanted to know.

"Dat's me. Bull Pizano."

"Whatcha want?"

"Ya brung dat message?"

"Maybe."

The foot came off Monk's back.

"Let's see it, den," the voice said good-naturedly.

Monk bounced erect with a **roar!** He loved to fight. And he loved his fights to be noisy.

But this fight wasn't. It was brief.

Before he could get organized, Monk found his legs whacked out from under him by that bat. This time, the voice landed on his back and the foot (a size 14) pressed down on his barrel chest, preventing respiration.

Monk got a good look at his assailant then.

The man who called himself 'Bull Pizano' was aptly dubbed. He looked to weigh in the neighborhood of 300 pounds. From where Monk lay, he might have been anywhere from 6-to-7 feet tall.

His face was a ball of swarthy wax topped by an unruly mass of black hair. His eyes were tiny (like Monk's, somewhat) and held a singularly vicious light. His nose was broad. But naturally broad. It did not appear to have been broken in the past. Monk could almost picture a brass ring fitted through that nose.

Bull Pizano was attired in the fashion associated with the tough gangs that prowled New York before Prohibition. He wore khaki pants and a jersey with horizontal black&white stripes. His arm *muscles* bunched like muskmelons. To anyone not in Monk's position, he might have seemed a humorous figure.

Monk made a grab for Pizano's leg. He attempted to upset the giant.

But the pillar of a leg would not bulge. Monk's eyes about bugged out of his head and *sweat* popped onto his minuscule brow before he gave up.

Bull Pizano smiled broadly. "Now I want dat message."

"Come an' get it, Gargantua," Monk invited.

Bull Pizano sighed.

He lifted his foot ... picked Monk up by his coat front ... and threw him across the room. The latter went through a handy door feet-first. His *howl* of surprise was followed by a thud!

When the homely chemist found his wits again, he thought he heard birds singing. He <blinked> ... sat up ...

... and found that this was true.

The room in which he had landed was full of cages in which yellow canaries were singing.

"This gets screwier an' screwier," Monk muttered.

He found his feet, nearly stepping on the tail of a curious cat. There were other cats in the room, he noticed.

Then Bull Pizano came lumbering into the room. He was very, very close to topping 7 feet, Monk noticed without pleasure. The former grabbed a chair and hefted it in Pizano's direction.

The giant slapped it aside and advanced, his bovine face agrin.

"Ya better not hoit any of my boids if ya know what's good for youse, Mac," he threatened.

Monk ignored the threat. He got a running start and threw himself -- feet forward -- against Pizano's chest. The giant fell with Monk atop him.

"Let's see how you like it," the apish chemist gritted.

Bull Pizano brought his hands up and clapped them over Monk's cauliflowered ears abruptly. This was a particularly painful tactic and elicited a squawl of *agony* from Monk.

Pizano next hoisted him off his chest by sheer strength. While Monk knelt in pain, Bull Pizano got up and recovered his hardwood bat.

5 men then entered by the front door, having just arrived.

"What's up, Bull?" one of them asked.

"Oh, nuttin' much," Bull told him. "I'm just woikin' this joik over a little. He's da guy dat's got da message Blackboid wants."

"Oh yeah? C'mon, boys! Let's frisk him!"

They bent down. Monk promptly decked one of them.

The others piled on his apish bulk. He fought back, gaining his feet once more.

The others swiftly drew back with torn coats, bruises, and other minor damage.

"Hey!" one of them demanded. "Just who is this guy?"

Bull laughed. *It was a laugh probably like Paul Bunyan's.*

"Dat's Monk. One of Doc Savage's boys."

"Uh-oh," a man said. "Count me out of this party. I had a friend who once tangled with that Savage guy. I ain't never heard what happened to him after that."

He promptly left the house in haste.

"Any more of youse boids wanna cut out?" Bull asked.

No one did.

"Okay," Bull said. "Now I'll hold dis monkey and youse guys give him the once-over."

Suiting action to words, he gathered up the hairy chemist in a bear hug and lifted him off the floor while the others gingerly searched his clothes.

Monk clenched his teeth in frustration. But he could do little beyond that. Someone held his legs so he couldn't kick.

The frisking produced a curious pistol of intricate design, some odds&ends ...

... but nothing resembling a radiogram. Bull squeezed Monk's thick chest.

"Where's dat message?" he demanded.

Around him, the yellow canaries sang as if they were in the natural habitat. Sunlight streamed through the windows. It was a late Spring day with not a scrap of cloud in the sky.

"Go chase yourself around in a circle," Monk suggested through clenched teeth.

Bull squeezed again, cutting off Monk's air.

"Dis reject from a zoo musta left dat message back at Savage's place," he said. "We got get it."

"Wait a minute, Bull," someone interjected. "We can't go bustin' into Savage's headquarters."

"Why not?"

The other looked uncertain.

"Well ..." he began.

Then recalling something, he exclaimed: "Hold it! This Monk character is always pallin' around with an overdressed dude named Ham. May we can talk this 'Ham' into bringin' the message here and save ourselves some trouble."

Bull Pizano pondered this for a full minute as if his mind were trying to wrap itself around the idea. *Which -- if appearances were accurate -- might conceivably have been the case.*

"Okay," Bull decided.

He put Monk down. The apish chemist almost fell over from dizziness caused by lack of oxygen. His homely face was **crimson**.

He steadied himself.

"Blazes," Monk said in a small voice.

V -- The Van Trick

In all his years with Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair could not recall when he had been so thoroughly bested by a single foe.

The burly chemist was tough. He could bend horseshoes in his bare hands and effortlessly fold a silver dollar in half between thumb and forefinger. Monk was a scrapper and the equal of few men outside of Doc Savage.

Yet, in this comical giant of a man who dressed like a street tough of 2 decades gone by, Monk discovered an opponent who not only had fought him to a standstill but also could actually manhandle him as if he were a child.

Just the realization of that sobering fact left Monk a little dazed. For the moment, he was out of fight and knew it.

Bull Pizano pushed Monk to a telephone stand. The apish chemist did not resist. He fell into the chair heavily.

"Get dat Ham guy down here wit' dat message. And no tricks, see!" Bull rumbled.

"Yeah, yeah," Monk squeaked.

His voice had resumed its normal childlike tone. Actually, it was more of a croak.

Monk picked up the handset ... then hesitated.

"One of you guys got a smoke?" he inquired. "I sure could use one right about now."

"No stallin'," Bull said warningly.

Someone threw Monk a cigarette package and a book of matches.

Monk speared a cigarette in his mouth and applied match flame. Then he fiddled with the receiver hook (it was a French-type phone) and got his party.

"Ham?" he rapped. "This is Monk."

There was a brief pause.

"Dry up and listen, shyster. Can you come over to Queens and give me a hand with somethin'?"

He supplied the address.

"Hurry it up, will ya! And bring that radiogram for Doc, too. It might be too important to leave lyin' around."

Monk abruptly terminated the conversation by hanging up. In a loud voice, he said something unintelligible.

"What?" Bull Pizano demanded. "What're you sayin'?"

"I said he's on his way like you wanted," Monk said innocently.

Bull rubbed his bluish jaw. His bovine face looked suspicious.

"It didn't sound like you wuz sayin' dat to me," he rumbled.

"What do you expect with all these goofy birds makin' such a racket!" Monk retorted. "I can barely hear myself think."

Just then, an orange tabby jumped onto Monk's lap. Taken by surprise, he brushed him off. Not gently. But not with any particular violence, either.

Bull Pizano, however, fell into a dark **rage**.

:Why you" he choked. "Lay a mitt on one of my kits will ya!"

He flew at Monk with his hardwood bat raised high.

The homely chemist -- not expecting such a reaction -- was slow to respond. The flailing bat caught him on his bullet head and he and the chair in which he sat both collapsed.

Monk suddenly sprawled in a nest of kindling, out cold.

"Dat'll show dat wise guy," Bull muttered. "No one lays a finger on either my kits or my boids if he knows what's good for him."

"Whew!" one of the thugs whispered to a pal. "Bull sure is cracked on the subject of those animals of his."

"Yeah," the other confided. "He thinks they're his friends. I seen him lay a guy's skull open once for accidentally stepping on a cat's tail."

The first man examined his feet warily to see that there were no cats in tail-stepping-on range.

It was probably that risk -- and the attendant danger of incurring big Bull Pizano's wrath -- which caused one of the thugs to offer a suggestion.

"Hey Bull," he said. "Why don't we go get that 'Ham' character now. We can snatch him in traffic when he least expects it."

"Yeah," ventured another. "He might suspect a trap when he arrives. But not before then. This ape will stay on ice for a while. Besides, I got an idea how we can this 'Ham'. It's goofy. But it could work."

Bull considered. Again, it was plain to see that this simple giant's mental machinery operated slowly.

"Okay," he decided. "Let's go."

They went.

Ham Brooks was perfectly aware that his friend and rival -- Monk Mayfair -- was a prisoner in Queens. He knew this because Monk had told him so.

The message had been relayed in a peculiar language spoken in the so-called Civilized World only by Doc Savage and his 5 aides. The tongue was the speech of the ancient *Mayan* civilization of Central America.

The **Bronze Man** and his men had learned the language from survivors of the Mayan race who lived -- lost to the World -- in an inaccessible valley in remote Central American mountains.

Few outside Doc's little group were aware of it. But this lost Valley was his source of fabulous wealth. The canyon held **Gold**. It was the treasure lode of ancient *Maya*. The descendants of that race (whose civilization rivaled that of old Egypt) mined the Valley.

There was a powerful radio receiving set in the Valley. When he needed funds, Doc Savage had but to broadcast at a certain hour on a 7th day. A few days later, a **gold**-laden burro caravan would come out of the supposedly inaccessible spot. The cargo (usually running into the millions) was always deposited in Doc's account in a Central American bank.

The **gold** was part of a strange legacy bequeathed to Doc by his father. It was to be used only to further his career as a professional trouble-buster and to aid Mankind. *(The entire story is told in "The Man of Bronze (#001)" .)*

After he apparently hung up, Monk had told Ham in *Mayan* that he was the bait in a snare to obtain the mysterious radiogram message.

What Ham did not know was that Monk had cannily wedged a match in the receiver hook of the telephone, thus preventing the hook from dropping and closing the contact. Ham had heard Monk plainly. The request for a cigarette was merely a ruse with which to obtain the needed match. Monk Mayfair rarely smoked himself.

Wasting no time, Ham busied himself with preparations. He was, of course, going to the address that Monk provided.

First, the dapper lawyer stowed the as-yet-unread radiogram in the huge safe which stood in one corner of the **Reception** room.

Then he moved to a cabinet containing a rack of strange-looking pistols and tiny ammunition drums. He loaded one of these weapons and checked it carefully.

The weapon was one of the intricate supermachine pistols which Doc Savage himself had perfected. These resembled oversized automatics but in actuality were miniature machine pistols capable of

spewing shells with unbelievable rapidity. In action, they made a sound not unlike that of a titanic bull-fiddle being strummed.

Ham stowed the fearsome weapon in a specially-padded holster which he wore under his morning coat. Extra ammo drums went in a pocket under the other armpit. These contained not ordinary shells but special "mercy bullets" consisting of composition material which broke upon contact with the skin, causing an anesthetic chemical to be introduced into the victim's bloodstream.

Doc Savage had perfected these bullets too. He did not believe in killing. Nor would he allow his men to take a life if it could possibly be avoided.

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Dapper Ham Brooks with sword-cane in hand took the private speed lift to the basement garage and availed himself of one of the **Bronze Man's** machines. He chose a small sedan which appeared deceptively ordinary.

In fact, it was constructed of armor plate and possessed bulletproof windows, sponge tires to foil punctures, and numerous other gadgets of Doc Savage's invention.

The coupe -- an undistinguished rolling fortress -- rolled up a ramp and out a concealed entrance. Ham pointed the car's nose toward Queens and -- in spite of the heavy afternoon traffic -- his progress was not appreciably hampered.

This was due to the lawyer's expert driving and to the fact that traffic police recognized the machine as belonging to Doc Savage (it was fitted with special low-number license plates) and cleared the way.

Ham made rapid time in this fashion and was soon tooling the sedan through the residential streets of Queens in search of the address that Monk had given.

A van cutting in from a side-street lumbered in front of the streamlined car. It was huge. It bore no marks and did not appear to be a commercial vehicle.

After gaining the road, the truck slowed considerably. Ham, annoyed, honked his horn. The truck did not speed up.

"Bally fools!" Ham snapped.

His gloved hands tightened on the wheel. This was a one-way street and narrow. Therefore he was unable to pass the offending truck.

Peering into the rear-vision mirror, he saw a red sedan trailing not many yards behind. The dapper attorney made a disgusted noise in his throat. The red sedan made backing up impossible. There were no side-streets along this stretch, he noticed.

"Stuck!" as he summed up the situation for himself.

But "stuck" was not quite the word for it as it turned out.

The rumbling van ground to a sudden halt. Ham -- caught flat-footed -- braked the coupe. The fine machine eased to a smooth stop.

Then the rear gate of the van tipped out and down, crashing to the macadam. The dropped section formed a ramp leading into the cavernous interior of the truck.

Ordinary a quick thinker, Ham Brooks did not suspect a trap until the red sedan surged forward and - with a clashing of bumpers -- nudged his machine halfway up the ramp. Another jolt and it was shoved within the van's darkened interior.

Ham attempted to leave his sedan. But the narrowness of the van prevented the door from opening.

"Confound it!" he fumed.

Men piled out of the red sedan and quickly hoisted the ramp upward. Another man who was prone on the van's roof grasped the lifted section of steel and secured it with a chain. It had been he -- unnoticed -- who had loosened the restraining chain on cue.

The men got back into their car. The van lumbered forward.

The speed with which the whole incident took place was blinding. In less than 40 seconds, Ham's coupe had vanished on a residential New York street as slickly as if a magician had waved a wand and caused it to vanish amid a puff of smoke.

Except that in this case, there was not even the "puff of smoke" to show that a trick had been accomplished.

There was just the big van and the red sedan following in its wake.

VI -- The Bronze Man

At approximately the same time that Ham Brooks was falling victim to the snare of the trick van, a large tri-motored amphibious plane cast its shadow over Manhattan as it banked toward the Hudson River.

The amphibian was not especially noticed in its flight. Modern New Yorkers are too jaded to look upon air travel as a novelty anymore. Such aerial traffic is so common that few (if any) stopped to gawk at the passing aircraft.

This plane received even less notice than most because its exhaust stacks were efficiently silenced and its props designed to reduce blade scream. The faint *hissing* that it did make was not audible from the ground.

Thus, the tri-motor passed over the city and slapped onto the Hudson as if invisible.

Engines throttled, the pilot guided the big plane toward a large warehouse of dirty **red brick** perched on a pier. The walls extended down into the water. A corrugated door faced the Hudson. It was toward that door that the amphibian slid.

The door opened -- mysteriously -- disclosing a concrete apron which sloped down into the river. Still under power, the plane rolled up onto this v=ramp and came to a rest within the vault-like warehouse itself. The great door then rolled shut, seemingly actuated by no human hand.

The warehouse bore a sign:

HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY

But there was no such business.

The supposed "warehouse" (and it had been such once) was a cleverly-disguised combination boathouse-and-seaplane hangar maintained by Doc Savage, the legendary *Man of Bronze*.

The tri-motor came to a stop in the aircraft section which contained other such craft ranging from several small speed planes to a pair of true gyros capable of rising vertically. Each of these craft, it could be seen, was equipped for amphibious maneuvering. These constituted the **Bronze Man**'s fleet of aerial conveyances.

In a separate section visible through an open door was the boathouse section for seagoing craft. The most remarkable item in that array was a small, ungainly submarine.

Acquired by the **Bronze Man** in an earlier adventure, it was an experimental craft designed (via its protective sled-like steel-hull runners) to pass under the ice of the North Pole. In fact, it had accomplished that feat in the past [*read "The Polar Treasure (#004)"*].

Currently it was in dry dock for repairs, having been seriously damaged in an outing when Doc Savage had engaged in an eerie battle with a phantom submersible which criminals had based in the East River [*read "Death in Silver (#020)"*].

Doc Savage himself emerged from his tri-motor carrying several equipment boxes. For the brief moment he was framed in the cabin door, he seemed to be a veritable giant. But then his stature appeared to dwindle as he quitted the craft.

This was an illusion produced by his marvelously symmetrical build. His *muscles* -- developed in a rigid scientific system of daily *exercises* which he had followed since childhood -- were so perfectly proportioned that unless the eye beheld him in comparison with another object to which might be compared, it did not register his true size.

Doc was a **giant**. His size, however, was secondary to his other characteristics.

For instance, his skin was a deep rich **bronze**, the result of long exposure to **Tropical** suns and **Arctic** winds. His hair -- a shade deeper **bronze** than his skin -- lay back smoothly against his head like a metallic skullcap. It possessed the peculiar quality of being water-repellant. Like a duck's back.

The lines of his features -- the unusually high forehead, the mobile and muscular and not-too-full mouth, the lean cheeks -- denoted a power of **character** seldom seen.

But the most striking of all was the **Bronze Man's eyes**. They were weird hypnotic orbs, seemingly capable of commanding attention at a glance. Their color was unique. Like pools of **gold** in which dust-fine *aureate* flakes swirled constantly as if impelled by optical winds. This illusion gave his *eyes* much of their riveting power.

Doc Savage, **giant of bronze**, dropped his equipment cases and worked a hatch open in the tri-motor's hull. Within, a small black autogyro reposed. He examined this, his bronze face inscrutable.

He was concerned. But because he had been schooled not to express emotion, his handsome countenance merely looked as if it had been sculpted into a permanent expression of intelligent resolve.

A strut on the gyro was damaged and would need repair. The accident had occurred while he was at his faraway *Fortress of Solitude*.

Upon leaving the retreat, the gyro had been snatched by a sudden gust of wind, nearly precipitating it against the rim of the volcano which contained the Fortress itself. Doc's miraculous reflexes had narrowly averted a mishap.

But the accident still gave the **Bronze Man** pause.

The Fortress of Solitude had been built at the suggestion of Doc's father who had -- early on -- placed him in the hands of a succession of scientists for the training which was to make him the scientific product that he became.

Its very inaccessibility (i.e., only an autogyro could alight on the ice lake) was important to preserve its secrecy. This necessitated that the **bronze giant** fly North in the tri-motor and then ferry himself to the rocky isle by gyro.

It was a less-than-efficient arrangement. And the gyro's near-accident had brought that fact home.

Closing up the tri-motor hatch, Doc went over to a clothes locker and changed his shirt. He donned a quiet tie and a brown suit coat.

As he dressed, he thought to himself that the **Fortress** (as it currently existed) was no longer practical. Its location deep in the **Arctic** was perfect. It was as secluded as one could get. And the environment was healthful as witnessed by the fact that Eskimos of that region do not suffer from colds.

However, transportation of materials (not to mention himself) and the *poison* gases ringing the isle were becoming too hazardous. The **Fortress of Solitude** would have to be remodeled, he decided to himself.

Now properly attired, Doc Savage strode with a catlike grace (which belied his more than 250 pounds) to a somber roadster and slid behind the wheel.

The machine rolled toward the ponderous metal doors facing inland. A touch of a dash button triggered an ultraviolet projector in the roadster's nose. This actuated a photoelectric cell causing the doors to open. (A similar device had opened the hangar door upon his arrival.)

The **Man of Bronze** piloted his machine toward his skyscraper **Headquarters** whose dirigible mooring mast became plainly visible many blocks distant.

Arriving at his secret basement garage, he noticed that Monk's machine -- as well as one of his own -- was missing.

He knew that three(3) of his men were out of the Country. That left only Monk and Ham. Both, he reasoned, were absent from **Headquarters**. A not unusual situation.

He rode his private elevator to the 86th floor, seeming not to notice the great force of gravity exerted by the rapid ascent. He made for the **Reception** room. The **bronze** portal -- when he approached it -- opened inward magically. This was no bit of *hocus-pocus* but an example of Doc Savage's great scientific skill.

He carried with a coin of *radioactive* material as did all his men. This was the door "key". Emanations from this activated an electric-eye hidden in the wall. This caused a relay to close and a mechanical contrivance opened the door.

The door valved closed after him. He gave this phenomenon no notice. It was a commonplace in his astounding life.

On the threshold, Doc Savage stopped short. His **eyes** were suddenly alert. Fine lights swirling in their **flake-gold** depths.

For a brief instant, a strange **trilling** filled the spacious **Reception** room. It was a peculiar sound. It seemed to come from nowhere and yet was everywhere. It permeated the room and rose-and-fell along the musical scale, but was devoid of tune.

It might have been a sound from Doc Savage's strange childhood in other lands. The wind filtering through a forest of *ice spires* or the *exotic* sound of a jungle bird.

This eerie trilling was, in fact, a small unconscious habit of his. It was something he did when surprised or when his thoughts were stirred in some way. The Bronze Man was often unaware that he produced the sound.

The ventriloquial *trilling* abruptly ceased.

Doc flashed across the **Reception** room to the huge safe. Its massive door hung ajar on one hinge. It had been expertly blown in some manner. Its contents were strewn about. Acrid smoke curled from the ancient box. Whoever had rifled the safe had done so not many minutes before.

Then there was the sound of *splintering* wood beyond a door. It had come from the adjoining **Library**.

He whipped to the cabinet from which Ham Brooks had earlier taken a supermachine pistol. Doc ignored the weapons (he never carried a gun himself) and pulled out a strange vest of multiple compartments.

He shucked off his coat and donned the vest, then replaced the coat afterwards. The vest was his gadget vest. Its many padded pockets contained a plethora of scientific devices. In addition, it was bulletproof.

Doc eased to the door from which muffled sounds came. His passing was so noiseless that he might have been a fragment of *bronze fog* drifting in from the street.

He pushed the door open a trifle. The sound of men moving about and conversing came loudly. He listened, cautiously.

A voice said plaintively: "But Bull! We got the damn message. What do you wanna hang around here for? Who knows when that **bronze** guy will be back!"

Another voice -- an infinitely deeper and more *powerful* one -- replied: "Shaddup! Dis is my show an' I'll do what I wanna. I hear dat dis **bronze** guy has got Midas beat all hollow. Mebbe we can heist some of dat dough."

"Well, I don't see nothin' except all these fancy books," the other muttered doubtfully.

"Hey!" a third man put in. "I found another locked door. Bring that Monk's coin gadget over here and see if it will open it."

Doc's face -- usually expressionless -- showed a flicker of concern. They had Monk!

Doc Savage, mighty *Man of Bronze*, was no weakling. Nor was he deficient in the bravery department. He would have thought nothing of pitching into the **Library** and confronting the raiders. He could not see them. But his acute sense informed him that there were only three(3).

But Monk Mayfair was evidently a captive (or worse) of this group. And locating his missing aide took precedent.

The **Bronze Man** glided back to his massive desk. He took from a drawer a box-like contrivance (not unlike an old-fashioned "magic lantern"). He threw a switch on the thing and pointed it at the window behind the desk.

The **black lens** threw no visible light. But on the pane in eerie blue letters appeared a message.

Monk has been kidnapped. I don't know what it's all about. But it appears to involve a mysterious radiogram that came for you today. I put it in the safe. I'm on my way to the address in Queens you'll find on the desk. Ham

The date and time of the message was inscribed below. It was not more than an hour ago.

This was the habitual method that Doc Savage and his men used to convey secret messages. Before he left, Ham had written the words in chemical chalk which left no visible mark but which -- under the **ultraviolet** light -- *fluoresced* or glowed.

Doc shut off the projector and the message abruptly vanished.

The **Bronze Man** located the Queens address. In the adjoining **Laboratory**, the sounds of men struggling with a stubborn door could still be heard.

Presently one of them (the bull-voiced one) growled: "Forget it! It won't open. Let's go. Maybe we can make dat Monk clown tell us where Savage keeps his booty."

Doc got down behind the great desk and extracted a pencil-like length of tubing from his vest. It was an interchangeable arrangement of tubes and lenses capable of becoming a variety of optical devices.

Hastily, he converted it into a slim periscope with which he could peer over the desktop surreptitiously.

The *bronze giant* watched in silence as the trio of invaders filed out of the **Library** disgustedly and proceeded on to the elevators.

He committed the faces of the 2 lesser crooks to memory. The giant in the striped jersey and carrying the baseball bat was too absurd a figure to go unrecognized in the future.

Doc waited until the elevator had sunk before he examined the havoc wrought by the departing trio. The **Library** (it was the most complete scientific library in existence except for the one at the Fortress of Solitude) was normally an orderly arrangement of bookcases. But many of these were upset or smashed. Huge tomes littered the tiled floor.

Doc passed on through the door which had baffled the intruders and into the huge **Laboratory**. It was the largest of the **Bronze Man's** suite of offices, being fully a block long. Ponderous scientific

devices stood about. There were many stands holding scientific testing apparatus. But nothing was upset, much to his relief.

Returning to the **Library**, he decided that the damage was not serious.

Doc's next move was to ride the speed elevator to his sub-basement garage. There, the somber roadster came to life under his touch. Its motor was wonderfully silent. Only by the sudden life in the ammeter and oil-pressure gauge could one tell that the ignition had been engaged.

The roadster entered traffic.

He had selected the roadster with the intention of beating the would-be thieves to their presumed destination in Queens. In that, he was foiled somewhat by the rush-hour traffic.

The auto made excellent progress thanks to solicitous traffic cops. But the **Bronze Man** got tangled up at an intersection where a hack ran a light and plowed into another cabbie. The drivers proceeded to initiate a brawl in mid-street, hopeless clogging the area.

Doc sent his narrow machine up onto the sidewalk for half-a-block, going slowly to give pedestrians time to get clear. Men stopped to gape at the sight of the massive **Man of Bronze** behind the wheel. Women regarded his regular features and broad shoulders with undisguised admiration.

At length, he circumvented the bottleneck. His **bronze** countenance registered mild disgust. The incident had cost him valuable time.

Not long after, Doc's roadster prowled slowly up a certain street in Queens and past a white frame dwelling with blue trim which his keen **eyes** told him was the number to which Ham had started out in quest of Monk.

There was no sign of either of their machines. Only a big gray truck parked perhaps 2 dozen houses down.

Doc parked a little beyond that and began to work toward the white house with care.

When the **Bronze Man** came near the solitary van, he paused, his nostrils dilating. For an instant, his unusual **trilling** ranged the scale tunelessly. There was an *odor* -- very faint -- emanating from the truck.

It was doubtful that anyone else in the World possessed olfactory organs able to scent that peculiar smell, never mind identify it. But it was part of his daily 2-hour system of **exercises** to train his senses as well as his muscles. The smell coming from the truck was one that he knew.

Doc moved to the van's rear in an attempt to investigate.

He was thwarted in this when a car pulled up suddenly and a bull voice howled: "Hey you! Get away from dat truck!"

It was Bull Pizano and his men just arriving. Doc recognized them although he still had yet to learn their identities.

He jumped away from the truck. Big Bull Pizano leaped from his machine, his baseball bat swinging. The others followed with guns.

Doc Savage whipped behind the handiest tree. A gun **cracked** and tore a limb off the tree (a lean elm). Somewhere a woman screamed "**Help! Murder! Police!**"

More bullets followed. They made brittle sounds like glass rods snapping when they came close. Bark jumped off the tree. Crouching, Doc flashed to a more substantial oak and disappeared behind it.

Bull Pizano came on recklessly. Even though they were better armed, his men trailed behind. They had recognized the **bronze giant** as Doc Savage and were thus wary.

Bull Pizano plunged headlong behind the big oak ...

... and found nothing! He bellowed in frustration.

"Where'd he go?"

His men stood around wearing confused expressions.

"Could be that he went up the tree," one offered.

They looked. The crown of branches above was thick and full of fresh **green** leaves. But nowhere in that leafy tangle could the **big Bronze Man** have found shelter.

Too, there were no branches closer to the ground than 20 feet. It seemed impossible that anyone could have climbed that smooth bole.

"Spread out!" Bull yelled. "He's gotta be somewheres around here. Nobody puts one over on Bull Pizano!"

Crouched behind a chimney on a roof which touched the oak tree's branches, Doc Savage made a mental note of the name: Bull Pizano.

He had heard it before. Bull Pizano was a waterfront tough known to have been involved in various smuggling rackets. His reputation went back to rum-running days and he comported himself as if those days were not yet gone.

Doc folded a tiny grapple and line, then stowed it in his gadget vest. The grapple was one that he carried constantly. It was a useful tool which had saved his life in the past. *It had possibly just done so again.*

Using the grapple, he had snagged a bough high in the big oak and ascended the silken line hand-over-hand, concealed from view by the sheltering trunk. Once in the branches, a quick apelike swing deposited him soundlessly on the nearby roof and to the sheltering chimney.

To Bull Pizano and his men who had been intently watching the oak's base for movement, it looked as if the **Bronze Man** had stepped behind the tree *and evaporated*.

Doc Savage crawled along the roof to the rear of the house. He clambered down the side of the dwelling, his strong *fingers* finding easy purchase where a cat would have been baffled.

The *Man of Bronze* worked his way through backyards and over low fences toward the blue-trimmed dwelling. He could hear Bull Pizano shouting not far away.

Presently, he came upon Monk's car which had been driven onto the grass behind the mystery house. It was empty.

Doc worked around the machine and got under a window. Employing his collapsible periscope, he peered within the house.

The first thing he saw was a yellow canary on a swing. It sat within a cage. Doc adjusted his view.

There were only 2 occupants in the room. If one discounted the assortment of canaries and lounging felines, that is.

One of those in the room was Monk Mayfair who was prone on the floor, his mouth gagged. His thick furry wrists were cuffed behind his back. And his loud suit was in tatters. Chains held his legs together. He looked as if he had been through a war.

The taller occupant of the room was a gunman who stood about nervously with one eye on Monk and his head cocked to catch the sounds of confusion which carried in from the street.

Doc tried the window.

Locked. And so was the adjacent pane.

He edged around the corner and got erect. He ran!

Moving with *blinding speed*, the **Bronze Man** rounded the house and threw himself against the front door! It sprouted a long vertical slit down its length and smashed inwards.

A *metallic bronze blur*, Doc Savage bounded across the parlor and into the room where Monk was a prisoner.

The gunman whirled as Doc materialized (or seemed to *materialize* so rapid was he moving!) in the room. With a yell, he squeezed off a shot.

The *bronze giant* -- set for such a move -- literally dodged the bullet. His muscles and reflexes were unbelievably coordinated.

But even Doc Savage was not infallible. A second bullet caught him full in the chest. It drove him backward against a wall where a great backswept arm cushioned the impact.

Then he came again.

The gunman looked his disbelief. He stood as if rooted.

Doc's *cabled bronze hands* seemed to swallow the gun, wielder's hand, and all. He wrenched!

The gunman bleated and a grating noise told that the crook's wrist had been broken.

Doc grabbed the squirming man by the neck and exerted *pressure* on certain spinal nerve centers. The latter promptly collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

The trick was one that Doc Savage had developed out of his fabulous knowledge of human anatomy. Of all his vast expertise, his greatest skill was as a surgeon (thus his nickname "Doc"). And this knowledge of human nerve centers enabled him to render the thug insensate. Only a relieving pressure would bring him around.

Doc paused to pump air back into his tortured lungs. The second bullet -- which had been deflected by the chain-mail lining of his vest -- had knocked the air out of him.

He felt of his ribs. None broken or even cracked, he decided.

Through all of this violent action, Doc's face had registered his perpetual impassive expression.

Doc Savage went to Monk Mayfair who was conscious. The simian chemist squirmed around on the floor in a futile effort to get free.

Various cats -- frightened out of the room by the gunfire -- mewed and howled outside. The canaries were silent for the first time.

Doc reached for Monk's gag, preparatory to releasing his aide ...

... but he never touched it.

Bull Pizano -- all 300 pounds of him -- came raging into the room.

"Roust my kits an' boids will ya!" he bellowed. "I'll moider ya ..."

He lunged at Doc with the hardwood bat.

Doc came erect ... weaved aside ... and threw up his mighty arms defensively. The bat missed.

Bull Pizano swung again. This time Doc's hand drifted out and snagged the bat.

He plucked it easily from the astounded man-mountain's grip and tossed it aside.

Bull Pizano just stared as if he could not accept what he had just witnessed. His slow mental machinery ground and his vicious eyes looked more piglike than ever.

The giant thug lunged! Doc caught him on the jaw with a short jab. The impact sounded like a tire blowout. Bull's round head rocked back.

But he came on. He made animal-like breathing noises through his nose.

A major battle impended. But it never developed ...

Because at that moment, Bull's cohorts entered the room with guns bristling.

"Hold it, you!" one challenged. "It's okay, Bull. We got him covered."

Bull Pizano -- his swarthy ball of a face dark with *rage* -- only made terrible sounds in his throat.

"It's okay, Bull," the other assured him. "We got him."

"Put your hands up, Savage!" he told the **Bronze Man**.

Doc straightened from his defensive posture and raised his hands. Bull Pizano glared menacingly. But the **Bronze Man**'s shift in attitude put him off guard.

Part of it, too, might have been the disconcerting effect of Doc's calm *flake-gold eyes*. They regarded Bull Pizano steadily and seemed to soothe the big thug's anger the longer they stared.

Bull shook himself out of his crouch and went for his bat. The others circled around the **Bronze Man**, their guns shaking nervously. On the floor, Monk flopped around like a beached fish.

Doc Savage considered the situation.

Monk was a prisoner. And Ham was a likely one, too. Doc did not know what was back of this affair as yet. But were he to remain a prisoner, there would be no one to pursue the matter further inasmuch as his other aides were out of the country.

He made an instant decision.

He tensed slightly. That was the only hint he gave of his next move.

The **Bronze Man** then performed a feat that an Olympic gymnast might have given a limb to be able to duplicate.

From a standing position, Doc executed a magnificent backflip which carried him 4 yards through the air. He crashed through a window!

Not prepared for such an unbelievable maneuver, the gunmen fired too late. They surged to the window and peered out.

"He's gone!" one ejaculated explosively. "Pulled that disappearing act of his again!"

Bull Pizano roared fury and burst through another window head-first. He ran about the area wildly but found no trace of the phantom *Man of Bronze*.

He came back presently.

"Let's get outta here," he rumbled. "Pile that Monk into the car."

The crooks (there were four of them) obeyed. They had a little trouble hefting the angry chemist.

Bull himself gathered up his caged canaries and placed them carefully in the machine.

Then he scoured the immediate vicinity for his cats. He was surprisingly gentle in the way he coaxed the cats into reach with a deep-voiced "*Here kitty kitty. Come to Papa.*"

Eventually Monk, the birds, and the cats were all loaded into the waiting car. One man took the truck.

"Hey! What about Joe?" a man asked of Bull from the wrecked house. "I can't wake him!"

"Leave dat chump! He's useless," Bull ordered from the car, his big arms full of feline.

The gunman jumped onto the running board.

The 2 machines roared off into the gathering dusk.

VII -- The Clue Cloud

Doc Savage, giant **Man of Bronze**, waited until the fugitive vehicles had turned a corner before he came down from the roof of Bull Pizano's erstwhile hideout.

Once again, he had successfully taken himself from sight while Bull's men were looking for him in the obvious places.

They were not, he decided, a particularly fast-thinking group. Regardless, they had given him a run for his money, he thought with chagrin.

The **Bronze Man** pelted for his waiting roadster. By this time, heads were peering out of suburban windows. Far off, a siren wailed like a banshee fatefully drawing near. He got the roadster in gear and drove off.

He did not drive rapidly, strange to behold. He tooled the quiet machine at a respectable speed around the corner where Bull Pizano's two-vehicle convoy had vanished. As he drove, he pulled a strange contraption from the glove compartment.

This was a metallic hood of chain-mail construction, similar to the material which comprised his protective vest. He drew this over his head. His **bronze** features were visible through a rectangular visor of **greenish** glass. He tripped a switch and the hood began to whirl softly.

While Doc drove at a sedate speed, his alert **eyes** stared out from the weird head covering. When he reached an intersection, he turned right without hesitating as if he knew precisely where he should go. The roadster (it was an open-top model which allowed great visibility) threaded its way through Manhattan.

At no time did the **Bronze Man** gain sight of Bull Pizano's machines. Yet he continued to follow them as unerringly as if they were but car lengths ahead.

Doc's mastery of Science and his inevitable foresight were responsible for this latest seeming miracle.

All of his cars -- in addition to their protective equipment -- were fitted with a variety of other devices of his invention.

One of these was a cylinder bolted to the chassis. This released a stream of chemical *vapor* which was heavier than air when a lever in the front seat was thrown. Its density was such that the gas stagnated invisibly where it settled and was not readily dispersed.

When he had passed the gray van on the Queens street, Doc had scented some of the chemical vapor. This had led to the inescapable conclusion that one of his machines was within the van spewing vapor.

He had only to pursue the gaseous trails (it could be seen as a sparkling **greenish** cloud) which was rendered visible by the hood he wore. The device worked on a fluoroscopic principle like the X-ray screens utilized in the larger hospitals to reveal the skeletal framework of a person standing behind it.

As he drove, he considered the situation. Monk was a prisoner and his car had been left behind. Therefore, it was Ham's machine which had somehow gotten into the back of the van.

Doc had a mental picture of how that might have been pulled off (a surprisingly accurate one!) and reasoned that Ham might still be trapped within the machine.

The sartorially-perfect barrister was doubtless fuming at having been captured in such a comic-strip manner. He had possessed, nonetheless, the presence of mind to throw the lever expelling the chemical vapor. This -- like the message left on the window back at *Headquarters* -- had been done automatically even though Ham had had no reason to believe that the *Bronze Man* was anywhere but at his *Fortress of Solitude*. Doc's men were well-trained.

The sparkling lime-colored *trail* led him to the waterfront section bounding the East River. The clue cloud led up to the corrugated doors of a warehouse and stopped like a *nebulous vine* cut by a giant meat cleaver.

Doc applied weight to the roadster's brake. It halted. A fog drifted in off the river rolling in cotton-like bundles over the piers. The tang of dirty water filled the damp air. Water *sloshed* noisily against decrepit pilings.

Doc Savage slipped into the street to reconnoiter. He was a *bronze shadow* flitting through the murk of early dusk. *No creature out of mythology ever moved with greater stealth.*

He found the warehouse to be quiet. There no guards loitering about. No sounds emanated from within. He drifted away to a telephone booth and made a rapid call.

When he got his connection, he gave the address of Bull Pizano's Queens hideout.

"One subject for transportation" he clipped and hung up.

The call had been made to an institution in the wilds of upstate New York that Doc maintained. This was his "*Crime College*" -- a place where he sent criminals captured in the course of his adventures.

At that very moment, an ambulance was being dispatched to Queens where it would secretly convey the gunman who lay unconscious there to the "*College*". There, a delicate brain operation would wipe all memory of the individual's crooked past from his mind.

He would be re-educated; taught a decent trade; and instructed to hate crime. When the course was completed, the man would be returned to Society as a respectable citizen.

The existence of the "*College*" was as secret as his *Fortress of Solitude*. Doc considered his method of rehabilitating wrongdoers more humane than imprisonment or execution. But he was nonetheless fully aware that the outside world might not agree. Thus the "*College*" remained unknown.

Doc quitted the phone booth. The fog -- growing danker by the minute -- seemed to swallow his Herculean figure ...

... and he was gone.

Bull Pizano was muttering to himself. The giant animal-loving crook was hunkered over a ham radio set in the cathedral-like confines of the warehouse. A cat -- gray as a mouse -- rubbed its back repeatedly against his leg. It purred like a well-tuned motor.

"Any luck, Bull?" one of the gunmen asked.

Bull only muttered some more. A procession of *hissings* and *cracklings* came out of the radio.

"Maybe Blackbird ain't near his set," the fellow offered a bit placatingly.

Bull grumbled and shut off the set.

"He should be," he scowled. "He made it sound important enough dat we keep dis radio message from da bronze guy. So now we got it and he ain't around!"

"Blackbird usually knows what he's doing," the other remarked. "Still, this radiogram ain't much. It stops in the middle of a sentence. How can it be so important?"

"I dunno," Bull admitted. "All Blackbird said wuz dis was biggern' diamonds. Me, I'm for dat. I've had enough of dis diamong-smugglin' racket. Between youse guys and Blackboid's crew, the divvy ain't so hot no more."

"Well, we can reach him later I guess. Say! What about these 2 bozos?"

He jerked a thumb toward Monk and Ham who were bound and gagged in chairs under the watchful eyes of the others.

"They ain't goin' nowhere," Bull grunted.

Monk looked no worse for his trip to the East River waterfront. But Ham had acquired a black eye, numerous bruises and contusions, and a torn morning coat. His sword-cane lay near the gray van.

He had only lately been removed from the van. He remained a frustrated prisoner all through the fight in Queens.

After his car had been so expertly boxed in, the dapper lawyer found himself trapped in the machine because its doors could not be opened within the confines of the van.

He was on the point of climbing out through a window when a huge hand (Bull Pizano's) emerged from the dark van interior and hauled him out of the car. Ham was briskly searched and deprived of the contents of his pockets.

When Bull Pizano failed to find the radiogram, he had hauled off and <slapped> the dapper lawyer. Ham woke later alone in the van's rear.

He settled down to await developments and thoroughly curse his stupidity. But not before remembering to throw the trace-vapor lever on the outside chance that Doc Savage might later pick up his trail.

Ham now knew that this move had been a smart once. The conversation which he overheard between Bull Pizano and underlings indicated that the **Bronze Man** was not only back but also active.

Monk had also communicated that knowledge to the bedraggled attorney through Morse code. He had <blinked> his tiny eyes to make the 'dots' and 'dashes'.

Having filled Ham in, the hairy chemist now proceeded to heap abuse on the aristocratic attorney for his failure.

"Y-o-u s-u-r-e f-o-u-l-e-d u-p t-h-i-s r-e-s-c-u-e , y-o-u s-s-s-i-f-i-e-d f-a-s-h-i-o-n p-l-a-t-e" , Monk <blinked>.

"R-e-s-c-u-e ?" Ham <blinked> back. "W-h-a-t m-a-d-e y-o-u t-h-i-n-k I w-a-s c-o-m-i-n-g t-o r-e-s-c-u-e y-o-u ! I w-o-u-l-d n-o-t w-a-s-t-e m-y e-f-f-o-r-t-s o-n a f-u-z-z-y b-a-b-o-o-n l-i-k-e y-o-u. I w-a-s m-e-r-e-l-y h-u-n-t-i-n-g b-a-c-o-n f-o-r l-u-n-c-h."

This reference to Habeas Corpus caused Monk to inquire (in code) about the porker's present whereabouts.

Ham only shrugged.

A cat strolled over and jumped up on Ham's lap just then. It proceeded to clean itself.

It was a white cat and it shed piles of clinging hair. Ham squirmed in his bonds in an endeavor to keep the cat from ruining his pants.

This was so comical (the pants had been torn in the fighting) that Monk make honking sounds of mirth through his nose. Ham purpled!

Taking notice, Bull Pizano reared up and yelled: "What are youse guys doin' wit' dat cat?"

He grabbed his bat and stomped over to Monk and Ham.

Unnoticed, Doc Savage took that opportunity to enter quietly through a side door, pocketing the steel probe that he had used to pick the lock.

The **Bronze Man** did not attack. He eased over to a stack of barrels and hid behind them. He was not seen.

Bull Pizano loomed over the distraught Ham Brooks. He was slapping one palm with his baseball bat. The wooden implement made meaty sounds smacking the hand. The force probably would have broken a lesser hand than Bull's.

"You leave dat cat where he sits if ya know what's good for youse," Big Bull warned meaningly.

Ham promptly ceased his squirming.

Then Bull turned to Monk.

"And youse, monkeyface. What's so funny?"

Monk's pig eyes met the similar orbs of his captor. The was **fight** in Monk's eyes. He made no effort to conceal it.

Bull's men -- all four of them -- watched and laughed among themselves. The ease with which they had captured two of Doc Savage's men and foiled the **Bronze Man** himself had caused their confidence -- not to mention humor -- to return.

They were enjoying themselves, completely oblivious that their **Bronze Nemesis** was within striking distance.

"Maybe he wants a fight, Bull," one of the thugs suggested.

Bull considered.

"Is dat so? You want another go-around, ape?"

Monk nodded vigorously!

"Untie 'im," Bull ordered.

Monk's handcuffs were unlocked and the chains removed from his ankles. He sprang to his feet and tore off his gag.

"**Yeeo-o-w-w!**" he howled gleefully and leaped at his foe. "Come an' get it!"

Bull came. He reared back and brought his thick hands down in a doubled fist on Monk's bullet head.

The hairy chemist grunted, then collapsed.

Sporting a huge grin, Bull Pizano placed an ample foot on Monk's back.

The thugs laughed and jeered at homely Monk Mayfair's attempts to hoist erect.

Gliding out of the shadows, Doc Savage came up soundlessly behind three of the gunmen. They were in a row. Like tenpins.

He grasped the heads of the 2 outside men and cracked them against the skull of the middle thug!

The **sound** of breaking coconuts which resulted caused Bull Pizano to look up in open-mouthed astonishment.

He bellowed and turned on the **Bronze Man!**

Monk -- seeing his chance -- bounded to his feet.

"Monk!" Doc Savage rapped. "Free Ham!"

But Monk roared like a bull ape instead. He ignored Doc and charged Bull Pizano from behind. His **rusty** nubbin head butted the big crook squarely in the back. Caught off guard, Bull went down like a stack of drums.

Monk then proceeded to jump up-and-down gorilla-fashion on Bull's striped back. The apish chemist made fierce squawling noises while he bounced. There were so inarticulate that they might have been noises of either **rage** or **pleasure**.

Doc got to Ham. The ropes securing the lawyer's wrists were tough. So the **Bronze Man** cut them with a folding knife that he carried. The gag came off next.

The first words out of Ham's mouth were:

"Doc! You've got to help Monk! That monster will slaughter him!"

The concern in Ham's voice was incongruous when one remembered that the dapper lawyer had promised to do just that to Monk on a weekly basis.

For the moment, Monk was doing well for himself, however. He was lustily employing Bull Pizano as a trampoline and obviously enjoying himself immensely.

Then the turnabout came.

Bull Pizano twisted his hulking frame over and Monk found himself bouncing on the giant thug's chest. Bull's ribs crackled and groaned under the force of the burly chemist's feet.

Then Bull grabbed one of the legs. Monk upset and fell.

Bull rolled on top of him and tried to slam Monk's bristled head against the concrete.

Monk -- no abider of rules himself -- bit Bull's right ear and spit out a piece.

Bull bellowed! Monk roared!

Unnoticed in the conflict, one of the gunmen had gotten away from the others and was inching along the floor for an opened crate. He fumbled a Tommy-gun from this crate (which evidently contained Bull Pizano's private arsenal).

Probably the gunman might have succeed in killing Doc Savage and his 2 men had he not in his excitement began firing before he could bring his weapon around. The submachine gun began hosing lead at random.

Several things happened as a result. All of them unfortunate.

The first frantic burst of slugs rattled the caged canaries in a far corner. Hearing this, Bull Pizano cracked Monk on the jaw and lunged -- bellowing curses -- at his own gunman. He found his baseball bat along the way.

The gunman hastily dropped the weapon and tried to look contrite. "No, Bull. No ..." he began.

Bull Pizano split his skull open with the bat.

Before that unfortunate fell dead on the floor, a ricochet caught Doc Savage in the chest. The slug -- having been spent -- carried little force. However, it struck the **Bronze Man's** gadget vest and detonated one of the many devices contained within. This one was a **tear-gas grenade**.

The grenade exploded violently, spewing eye irritant. Doc was overcome instantly. Ham seconds after.

They lurched away. But the gas had mushroomed into an overpowering ball around them.

Doc got the device out of his vest and hurled it in the general direction of where he had last seen Bull Pizano on the theory that if everyone was helpless, all would be momentarily safe from harm.

That move was hardly necessary.

The tear-gas grenade -- designed for outdoor use -- filled the warehouse rapidly. The building was soon full of wheezing, choking, coughing men who stumbled against one another and other objects as their eyes burned and streamed hot tears.

Cats squawled, adding to the uproar. They clawed at legs that came too close.

But it was Doc Savage and Ham Brooks who got the worst of it. Monk -- out cold as a result of Bull Pizano's blow -- was oblivious.

Pizano and his remaining men (they had recovered their wits amid the tear-gas confusion) -- being closest to the door -- got that open under the frantic direction of their boss and drove off in the gray van, nearly demolishing the truck in the process.

Doc and Ham eventually stumbled out the side door. The **Bronze Man** pulled out a small gas mask (it consisted only of a respirator and oxygen container) and inhaled fresh air.

He passed the device to Ham who greedily imbibed. Presently, their eyes cleared.

Doc went in to recover Monk. By this time, the warehouse had begun to clear of the gas. But it was still too distressing to venture in unprotected. So Ham waited while Doc carried the unconscious chemist out.

Coming around as a result of a stimulant which Doc Savage had administered with a hypodermic taken from a now-damaged vest, Monk blinked **red-rimmed** little eyes and asked: "What happened?"

"A slight setback," Doc informed him. "They got away. All but this one."

Monk got to his feet.

"Accident nuthin!" he insisted. "They ran. We beat the pants off them bums!"

Ham regarded the hairy Monk with an incredulous stare.

When the gas had cleared, Doc Savage examined the warehouse. The others tagged along. The **Bronze Man** was particularly interested in the ham radio set.

In the corner where the dead man sprawled, the canaries had expired in the cages. Some from bullets. Others from either the effects of the tear gas or from sheer terror.

Monk noticed this and lost his ear-threatening grin.. He also eyed the ruined condition of Doc's clothes. Then he said a strange thing.

"I wouldn't want to be us when that Bull Pizano finds out his birds are croaked."

Doc Savage came back with the radiogram envelope.

"It's blank," he said. *There was no trace of disappointment in his face or tone.*

"They undoubtedly substituted a blank for the real message just in case you caught up with them," Ham remarked. "But I overheard them discussing its contents. Apparently the bally thing was rather vague. Merely an appeal for help from a man named Franklin on a ship off the South African coast."

"That was the upshot of the message?" Doc asked, puzzled.

"Evidently. That 'Bull' person was baffled by it."

"No hint of why they tried to keep such a message out of our hands?"

Monk answered that.

"They were workin' for a guy called Blackbird Hinton. We didn't see him. But they were trying to raise him by radio. They weren't getting' anywhere."

Doc Savage considered.

At length, he said: "There is no more to be done here. Let us return to **Headquarters** and pursue this through other channels."

They left the vicinity.

Night had clamped down on Manhattan. The city was a great velvet carpet on which were sprinkled myriad jeweled lights.

The "Great White Way" -- as New Yorkers had dubbed Broadway -- was a glitter of illumination. The towering skyscrapers of the downtown section darkened as late-night workers filed home.

High above in the spire which housed Doc Savage's New York headquarters, lights blazed on the 86th floor.

Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, and Ham Brooks had returned to their skyscraper aerie with somewhat downcast spirits. They had all changed clothes. The **Bronze Man** had attended to their various injuries with his superb medical skill.

Seated in the **Reception**-room where they were gathered, Ham wore a cutaway cast. he had retrieved his sword-cane and was rolling it in his gloved hands contemplatively. He stopped to accept a raw steak from Monk which he applied to his black eye. Monk had himself been using the meat on his swollen jaw with no noticeable effect.

Habeas Corpus sat in a corner scratching himself like a dog. They had retrieved the shoat from a Queens dog pound where it had been taken in as a stray.

Ham attempted a few cracks over the occurrence. But neither side showed much enthusiasm for squabbling.

Altogether, they were a subdued group. Only Doc Savage showed any life. He was busily making phone calls in an effort to locate the missing Bull Pizano and his men.

Presently, a <knock> came at the door. Doc directed: "Monk - answer that, please."

Monk ambled to the portal and opened it by hand.

"What do you want now?" the apish chemist demanded of the caller in a belligerent voice.

"I got another message for Doc Savage, ape-face. He back yet?"

It was Morris O. Jones, the messenger boy.

Monk was about to resort to a snappy retort when Doc cut in.

"Show him in, Monk," the **Bronze Man** said quietly.

"Step this way, midget," Monk growled.

Morris O. Jones' manner changed abruptly when he was ushered into the quiet-yet-commanding presence of the **Man of Bronze**.

"G-gee," he breathed. "Are you Doc Savage?"

Doc smiled in acknowledgment.

"You have a message for me?"

Jones handed it over, awe taking his words away.

It was another radiogram. Doc tipped the boy generously.

Jones just stood there gawking. He had completely forgotten about asking for the **Bronze Man's** autograph.

"You've had your fun, short stuff. Now scram!" Monk told him unkindly.

Morris O. Jones turned a critical eye toward the apish chemist.

"I see you've met your betters," he said, appraising Monk's bruised face.

Monk scowled and feigned for the departing messenger boy who danced out of the way.

The hairy chemist started to follow ...

"Monk!"

It was Doc Savage's voice. It stopped the homely chemist in his tracks and brought Ham to his feet.

"Yeah?" Monk said anxiously.

Doc was reading through the radiogram.

"Trouble."

"What is it, Doc?" Ham demanded.

"This is a message from Renny's associates in South Africa," the *bronze giant* told them grimly. "They say that he has been seized by unknown criminals at a radio station in Cape Town."

VIII -- The Aeromunde Trek

The news of the abduction of Renny Renwick in Cape Town, South Africa dispelled the gloomy mood into which Monk and Ham had fallen.

This is not to say that it lifted their spirits. Renny had been a comrade-in-arms through many a bloody adventure.

But this was something they could sink their teeth into after the discouraging affair of the stolen radiogram and the equally discouraging brush with the Bull Pizano gang.

Monk and Ham fell to work with a will.

Doc Savage had engaged the services of fully half the private detectives in New York and New Jersey in his effort to locate Bull Pizano and his men. The sleuths were actively hunting the big crook and his truck, its license plate numbers provided by Doc's photographic memory. These investigators reported hourly and Doc and Monk were taking the calls.

Monk hung up after speaking to one of the detectives.

"No luck, Doc. Sounds like Pizano mighta skipped town."

The **Bronze Man** nodded. He turned to Ham who had just entered from the **Library** where he had made a transatlantic call to Renny's engineering associates.

"What have you learned?" Doc asked the lawyer.

Ham absently flicked a speck of dust from his immaculate coat.

"Not much, I'm afraid. Renny's hydroelectric project was attacked earlier today by gunmen. The marauders appear to have been pursuing a strangely-garbed man who has not been identified.

"But a man who answers his description was found drifting at sea by the Australian liner *Brisbane* last night. It would seem that this man made his way to see Renny, was overtaken, and kidnapped. Renny was not hurt.

"Later, however, there was another fight at the project and Renny was last seen chasing someone toward Cape Town. Witnesses identified someone who fits Renny's description being carried out of the Cape Town radio station by gunmen some hours after. They, in turn, fit the descriptions of the earlier attackers. The criminals vanished and the authorities found the radio operator unconscious. He hasn't much of a story to tell either, I'm afraid," Ham summarized.

"These men were not identified?" Doc asked quietly.

"No," Ham told him. "They are not Cape Town thugs according to authorities over there."

Briefly, Doc's eerie trillⁱing rose and fell in the spacious Reception-room ... then ebbed away.

What had begun as a struggle over a mysterious message was developing into something with worldwide consequences. For it had become obvious to the **Man of Bronze** that the business of the radiogram from South Africa tied in somehow with Renny Renwick's kidnapping there.

"This is getting' interestin'," Monk muttered. "I think I'll go get a paper. Maybe there'll be somethin' in that."

He departed.

"Ham," Doc directed, "call the local authorities and explain to them about the affair in the East River warehouse and the dead criminal who can be found there."

"Right-o, Doc."

Ham put in the call ... spoke in quiet tones for some moments ... and hung up.

"They say anytime you care to make a formal statement, that's fine with them."

"In other words, they do not intend to interfere with our own investigating?"

"No," Ham replied.

That satisfied the **Bronze Man**. Neither he nor Ham acted as if the police attitude was anything but expected. But such consideration is not usually bestowed upon private citizens.

It happened that Doc Savage had been of great assistance to the New York authorities in the past. And they had rewarded him with a high honorary police commission. As a matter of fact, Doc held similar honorary commissions all over the World.

In that light, the police tended to "look the other way" when Doc's work caused havoc such as had occurred in Queens and later in the East River warehouse.

Monk returned waving a late edition of the *Planet*, a tabloid that he favored.

"Hey Doc!" he squeaked. "Lookit this."

He slapped the tabloid before the **Bronze Man** and planted a stubby forefinger on an item.

It was one of those human interest pieces which editors use to lighten their pages. This one told of a peculiar buying spree by a big fellow who had made the rounds of various New York pet shops buying out their stocks of cats and canaries. The scribe described the buyer and inserted some levity to the effect that the canaries were likely food for the newly-bought felines.

Doc glanced over the description.

"Bull Pizano," he said grimly.

Monk nodded. "But that was hours ago. Before we got those detectives goin'. He coulda skipped town after that."

Ham snorted!

"There is still time for our investigators to locate Pizano."

He did not sound especially confident. But it was Ham's policy never to agree with anything Monk Mayfair said.

Doc's *flake-gold eyes* whirled in thought.

"Bull Pizano is not our main concern now with Renny in trouble. Although his apprehension would certainly be desirable. We will keep the detectives working until the time we depart for Cape Town in the event that they turn something up. In the meantime, we prepare for the journey and get some needed sleep."

"But shouldn't we leave immediately?" Ham asked concernedly. "We can spell each other flying the tri-motor."

Doc Savage shook his *bronze* head.

"Flying from New York to Cape Town would require too many refueling at out-of-the-way locations to be practical."

"Then how are we gonna get there if not by plane?" Monk asked, not unreasonably. "A transatlantic liner would be even slower."

"We are going," the *Bronze Man* informed them, "**by Zeppelin.**"

The Zeppelin *Aeromunde* docked at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey promptly at 9:00 the following morning. Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, and Ham Brooks were there to meet it.

As the huge silver airship was being winched down and coupled to the crane-like mooring tower, Monk remarked: "Boy! I never thought we'd see that baby again."

Monk was referring to the fact that they had traveled on the *Aeromunde* once before. It was in the course of a previous adventure which -- coincidentally -- had taken them to Africa.

The *Aeromunde* was a Zeppelin with a strange and bloody past. Built almost 2 decades ago in Europe, it had vanished without trace on a Mediterranean flight. The disappearance of the airship had been one of the World's greatest mysteries ...

... until Doc Savage-- investigating rumors of a ghost Zeppelin sighted in Maine -- stowed away on the craft and subsequently found himself in a lost African oasis where the airship's crew were enslaved and being to work the diamond mines for a pair of evil villains. Doc and his men freed the unfortunates and punished the malefactors [*read "The Lost Oasis (#007)"*].

After the adventure, Doc restored the airship to the nation that owned it. Now, even though the craft was many years out of date (it had been the most advanced dirigible of its day), that country was sending

it on a globe-girdling goodwill tour intended to drum up support for lighter-than-air craft as a passenger service.

The *Aeromunde* was in New Jersey on one leg of that trek to take on diesel fuel and fresh hydrogen for its ballonets.

It was no great feat for Doc Savage and his aides to secretly secure passage on the mighty dirigible. The owner nation was duly grateful to the *Man of Bronze*. And the airship was taking on passengers at each docking anyway.

Doc, Monk, and Ham were spirited aboard before the regular passengers were allowed entry into the air monster's vast innards along with their luggage. The latter included cases of special scientific equipment which they thought might come in handy during the search for Renny.

The three were welcomed aboard by the *Aeromunde's* captain and shown to the private staterooms they were to occupy.

Ham looked about their adjoining accommodations approvingly.

"This is a trifle better than what we had to put up with the last time by Jove," he remarked.

He was thinking of their ordeal as transatlantic stowaways in the airship's envelope.

They set about stowing away their luggage and equipment. Monk opened a carryall bag and the pet pig Habeas Corpus trotted out. Much to Ham's disgust.

"On no!" he moaned. "Don't tell me I'm going to have to spend the entire voyage cooped up with that flea-bitten circus animal!"

"And you'll like it too," said Monk. "If you don't, you can just lump it you writ of habeas hokum."

The hairy chemist opened a metal case. This contained a small, complete-but-amazingly compact chemical laboratory.

"This should come in handy," he announced.

An hour later, the citizens of New Jersey and New York were treated to a rare sight. That of a huge airship sailing majestically out to sea.

Doc Savage and his men settled down for the long voyage. With her 5 motors reconditioned since the African adventure, the *Aeromunde* was still eminently airworthy. There was none of the pitch and roll which makes ocean liners so disagreeable to many travelers.

The airship cruised over the Atlantic at a high altitude. There was a strong tail wind. London lay ahead. After that, Cape Town, South Africa.

For the most part, Doc Savage remained in his stateroom, desiring to avoid curiosity seekers. He took his meals there.

Monk also kept out of sight, fearing his unusual physique might betray the **Bronze Man**'s presence.

There were numerous newspapermen covering the *Aeromunde's* voyage. And despite the fact that Doc habitually shunned publicity, they were likely to beat down the doors trying to get stories or photographs of the "*Man of Mystery*" (as they often called Doc in print) if they learned of his presence.

The first 2 days of the trip were quiet and tedious. Worry over Renny Renwick's fate rode their thoughts. Only Monk's latest effort at getting Ham's goat livened things up.

He had trained the shoat Habeas Corpus to steal Ham's socks. But only one of each pair. As a result, by the 3rd day Ham was in a rage because he was left with only one sock of each color and was forced to wear a mismatched pair.

"You missing link!" he shrieked at Monk. "You poor man's Cardiff Giant!" You think this is funny?"

He waved the tattered remnants of several silk socks.

"Yeah," Monk said brightly. "I think it's funny. Don't you, Habeas?"

The porker looked up at the distressed attorney and seemed to say: "*Yeah. He sure looks funny, all right.*"

Ham threw his cane at the pig who promptly sought shelter behind Monk's bandy legs.

To cool off, Ham ended up taking a stroll through the ship. Inasmuch as he was not as striking a physical specimen as either Doc or Monk, it was thought safe for him to mingle with the passengers. In fact, he had been bringing Doc and Monk their meals.

"That shyster is gonna bust an artery one day," Monk predicted. "He worries about his clothes so much."

He shooed his pig away and settled down to watch Doc Savage.

Doc was going through his daily 2-hour ritual of **exercises** as he had done each day during the ocean crossing. These were the explanation of his amazing physical and mental powers.

They lasted a full 2 hours, every second of which the **Bronze Man** worked out at full speed. He had adhered to this regimen faithfully ever since -- as a youth -- the elder Savage had placed him in the hands of scientists for the express purpose of making him what he was today. A **superman**.

He began by making his muscles tug one against the other until every inch of his *mighty* body (he wore only black silk shorts) glistened under a film of *perspiration*. He juggled mathematical problems in his head simultaneously, sharpening his mental acuity.

Next, the *bronze giant* produced various apparatus designed to enhance his superhuman senses.

He employed a device which created sound waves of frequencies above-and-below those audible by the human ear. As a result, he possessed aural organs capable of registering these sounds. His hearing was keener than it was thought possible for a human being.

Doc named numerous odors from tiny vials by scent alone while wearing a blindfold. Then -- still blindfolded -- he read pages in Braille -- the system of upraised dots used by the blind in place of print. This honed his sense of touch.

Monk watched in fascination because the mighty **Bronze Man** went through these -- and many others -- exercises at a nonstop pace which would have prostrated a man unused to it.

Monk, in fact, sweated a little just watching. The burly chemist was not a great believer in regular exercise.

It was while Doc Savage was toweling himself at the conclusion of his daily ritual that Ham Brooks returned. He was, they noticed, as white as the proverbial ghost.

"What's the matter, fashion plate?" Monk inquired unkindly. "Your tailor up-and-die?"

The dapper lawyer made fish-breathing movements with his lips. But no words emerged.

"Ham!" Doc rapped. "What is the problem?"

The shaken attorney took a deep breath ... swallowed twice ... and croaked:

"Bull ... Pizano ... is on ... board!"

"What!" Monk howled. "Lemme at 'im!"

"Wait, Monk," Doc ordered. "Are you sure, Ham?"

"Sure? How ... can I mistake ... him? That ... monster is almost as ... ugly ... as Monk here."

"Did he see you?" Doc asked.

His *golden eyes* were steady.

"I...I'm not certain," Ham swallowed. "I almost bumped into him in the dining hall."

Just then, Habeas Corpus trotted happily through the door. It was the sliding type, common on airships. Ham had left it ajar.

The pig had something in its mouth. Monk went over to see what it was.

"Whatcha got, Habeas? Another of that clothes dummy's socks?"

Monk pried the hog's jaws loose and a bird -- a *yellow* bird -- flew out.

It was a **canary**, evidently not badly hurt from Habeas' playful mauling.

Ham groaned like a soul in torment.

"I knew it! That fool hog is going to get us all killed for sure!"

Bull Pizano took that opportunity to walk by.

"Here, boidy," he called entreatingly. "Here, boidy. Come to Papa."

He caught sight of Monk through the open door and let loose with a thundering **howl**.

"I mighta known!" he yelled.

Monk -- his arms swinging -- roared in reply and rushed for the giant Bull.

Doc Savage then did something he had never done before ...

He interfered with one of Monk's fights.

A **bronze cyclone**, he descended upon Monk and hurled him the length of the room with a single shove of his great **cabled** arms.

Then Doc flashed toward big Bull Pizano.

Bull lacked his baseball this time. So there was no preliminary action. Doc moved in, **bronze** fists lifting.

Bull spread his beam-like arms openhanded with the intention of gathering Doc up in a crushing bear hug.

Doc landed the first blow. His knuckles crashed against Bull's flat nose so fast that the giant saw only a momentary **bronze blur** before his nose became a bubbling **red mass**.

Bull bellowed! The sound was blood-chilling.

He came on. His hairy arms swept together. Doc ducked under them, bobbing up to one side where he rained hard blows against the giant's midriff.

Breath **whooshed** out of Bull Pizano's bellows-like lungs. His pig eyes grew terrible.

He brought an arm back and let it fly. It caught Doc across the chest and bowled him back. The **Bronze Man** kept his feet, however.

The blow conceivably might have killed another man. But Doc Savage regularly subjected himself to similar punishment in order to toughen himself. Steel-like ribs and muscle padding cushioned the blow.

Ham stepped in now, his sword-cane unsheathed. There was a **brownish** stain on the fine blade's tip. This was a quick-acting anesthetic.

Suddenly confronted with the glittering needle of steel, Bull Pizano reacted unexpectedly. Rage seemed to ooze out of his hulking form. He regarded the blade the way a bird is supposed to stare fixedly at a serpent.

He took a halting backward step ...

... then with a groaning *yowl* of what might have been fear, he crashed out of the stateroom suite and down the corridor.

Just like that. One second he was the center of pandemonium. And the next, he was gone!

Ham stared at the tip of his sword-cane incredulously.

Monk -- gaining his feet -- demanded: "What happened? Why'd he run off like that?"

"Ham frightened him off," Doc pointed out.

Monk told hold of both gristle tufts which passed for his ears.

"That tailor's dummy. Scared off that monster?" he yelled. "I don't believe it. I just do not believe it!"

Ham -- who looked very much as if he too found the matter hard to accept -- recovered his composure. He made a deliberate show of calmly sheathing his sword-cane.

"Why, my good man," he purred, "of course he ran away. He recognized a superior fighter when he saw one."

Ham smiled a sneering cat-grin.

Monk looked like he wanted to so sudden violence. But he turned to Doc Savage instead.

"Why did he run, Doc?"

The **Bronze Man** -- closing and securing the stateroom door -- summed up his analysis of the phenomenon.

"Even the bravest of men," he stated calmly, "feel terror when faced with certain kinds of danger. Bull Pizano ran when Ham was about to stab him. It might be that he fears knives or sharp instruments. It is not an unreasonable phobia."

"I'll remember that next time," Ham put in soberly.

"Now what?" Monk asked Doc. "We can't just stay here."

"No," Doc admitted quietly. "Bull Pizano and whoever may be with him are too dangerous to be permitted to roam the *Aeromunde* at will. We will have to track Pizano down and render him harmless without delay."

"He's probably on his way to South Africa too," Ham pointed out. "Perhaps his superior -- this 'Blackbird' fellow -- can be found there."

"Which means," Doc added, "that he may be able to provide a lead to Renny's whereabouts. Thus making subduing him all the more imperative."

"Well what're we waitin' on!" Monk yelled. "Let's go get that guy!"

The apish chemist windmilled his long arms violently to limber up. He knew that Doc had taken him out of the fight because he feared that Monk would be seriously injured.

That had stung the homely chemist's pride. He looked up to his **bronze** chief and was anxious to prove that he could handle the big crook.

"We will begin immediately," Doc announced.

Monk and Ham took a moment to check their supermachine pistols.

"No guns," the **Bronze Man** admonished. "Hydrogen."

The 2 men understood. The highly-flammable lifting gas in the dirigible was dangerous. A single spark could ignite it.

The interior of the Zeppelin -- even a craft as large as the *Aeromunde* -- was by no means spacious. The greater portion of the ship -- the cigar-shaped envelope -- contained the tremendous hydrogen-filled lifting cells. The passenger and crew compartments were relegated to the smaller control gondola which hung beneath the envelope.

In other words, space was cramped. Even the corridors running throughout the passenger area were barely 2-men wide.

Thus it was that Doc, Monk, and Ham -- walking down one of these corridors -- turned a corner and nearly collided with Bull Pizano and his gang.

Bull now had his bat. And his men (he had obviously recruited several others since) displayed guns. One raised his weapon.

"There they are" he exploded and took aim.

"Back!" Doc rapped.

His voice crashed with urgency.

"They do not understand that they can destroy this ship with a chance shot."

Monk and Ham hesitated.

"Move!" Doc yelled.

His great **bronze** arms swept them back irresistibly.

Realizing the danger to the airship and its passengers, the three of them retreated and put on speed. A single bullet knocked a hole in one wall. Their pursuers were hard on their heels. Fortunately, the corridors did not travel in straight lines any appreciable distance. So they were not fired upon again.

The **Bronze Man** led them forward toward the control room. They came to a vertical ladder which led up into the envelope itself. The shaft seemed to extend upward for miles!

The three ascended. It was a long climb through the inspection shaft, one of the several which led up to the ridge catwalks. They gained this. Below, the giant drum-shaped hydrogen cells lay on either side.

"Aft," Doc breathed.

They worked aft.

"I don't like this retreatin'," Monk muttered.

They passed several other vertical shafts as well as many inspection tunnels leading into the envelope's radial girders which resembled ribs and gave the craft its shape. This network of passages enabled the ship's riggers to repair gas leaks or tears in the ship's fabric. The hydrogen ballonets might have been the organs of a cavernous monster whose gullet they were negotiating.

This caused Monk to mutter: "Now I know how Jonah felt."

Cre-e-ek! Crumf!

Ham nearly jumped at the grinding noise. Then he recognized that it was the sound of elevators and steering rudders responding to control wheels forward. The sound meant that they were near the tail.

They reached the sternmost inspection shaft at about the same time Bull Pizano topped the catwalk where they had earlier emerged. Big Bull seemed to be having difficulty with the narrow catwalk.

"Maybe he's afraid of heights too," Monk observed before he followed Doc and Ham down the tubular-runged ladder.

This ended in a compartment in back of the keel catwalk. There was a hatch in the floor, nothing else.

"Dead end," Monk said, small-voiced.

"No," Doc returned. "This hatch leads to one of the motor gondolas."

He "dogged" the hatch open. Below, the Atlantic glistened *blue* in the Sun. But that was not what drew their attention.

Directly under them, the motor gondola hung suspended from the airship's keel by struts. It was a pod of an affair, large enough to hold several men. A ladder connected the open hatch and the gondola. But it was a hairy climb in mid-air.

The huge propeller spun wickedly at the gondola's ramp -- two on each side and one just ahead of the tail assembly. (They were at the latter engine now.)

They paused to listen.

"I think I hear them," Ham said.

Doc nodded grimly. "They are not far behind."

"We can maybe hold them off from that gondola," Monk suggested hopefully.

"Perhaps," Doc stated. "First, let us confuse the issue somewhat."

He reached into his many-pocketed vest and extracted a metal egg on which a timer was affixed. He set the timer and pitched the egg under the vertical shaft down which Bull Pizano and his gang were climbing.

The grenade let go and a black devil of **smoke** filled the compartment, obscuring them. It was harmless -- being merely a **smokescreen** -- so gas masks were unnecessary.

The **Bronze Man** said: "Follow me."

He reached out to direct his men by touch. They went along not certain where they were being led. But utterly confident in their Leader.

Above, Bull Pizano yelled profanity when the black **pall** rose up the shaft around him. Cautiously, he and his men (there were 6 in all) descended the long loader. When they touched the compartment floor, they milled around in confusion, beating their hands against the sepia **smoke** to clear it.

It only seemed to help because the open hatch was actually sucking the stuff from the ship. They discovered this when a man narrowly missed falling through the hatch to his death.

Bull got down on his knees and peered out. Zeppelins are not fast things. So there was no appreciable slipstream as would have been the case with a heavier-than-air aircraft.

"What's down there?" a man asked.

"I dunno," Bull growled. "But I t'ink dey went down there. I can see a hatch on dat motor egg."

By this time, most of the **smoke** had cleared and they could see one another.

"We go down?" a gunman inquired. He didn't look pleased with the notion.

And neither did Bull Pizano. He looked about a little wildly and happened to notice that the struts holding the motor gondola were bolted to the floor on which they stood.

"I got me an idea," Bull announced proudly after a long pause. "We went past some tools up dere. Go find some monkey wrenches."

A man returned toting a pair of the cumbersome tools not long after.

"Let's get dis **bronze** guy outta our hair once an' for all," Bull said pleasurably.

They fell to working on the supporting bolts. Bull did most of the work. First one, then another worked loose.

Vibrations from the unbalanced motor pod shook the airship. The struts groaned under the shifting weight. A gas line broke. Fuel pooled stinkingly at their feet. A third bolt came free.

The remaining strut gave a *scream* like a frightened animal and buckled. The gondola hung by virtue of that tortured strut, its propeller shuddering crazily.

"It's working!" a man enthused.

Bull went to work on the final bolt. It was tough going because stress froze the bolt. But he managed it with some excruciating groaning of his own.

Abruptly, the floor stopped shaking.

The motor gondola fell several miles into the wide Atlantic. They were too high to hear it splash. But they saw the end clearly.

The gondola dwindled to a black dot which turned into a brief white flower and sank beneath the waves.

"Dat," Bull Pizano said, puffing out his not inconsiderable chest, "finishes dat **bronze** mug an' his pals."

IX -- Zep Brawl

A hush fell over the assemblage of rogues. Scraps of black smudge from the spent grenade still hung in the air or were sucked out through the open hatchway.

Below, the **blue** water looked almost brittle. It gurgled suddenly. But there was surprisingly little oil slickening the waves.

After a full minute, there was no sign that the huge engine pod had been precipitated into the water.

The oily patch of water in which the *Aeromunde's* stern gondola had been swallowed soon fell behind the dirigible's gigantic tail.

The silence was intruded upon by one of Bull Pizano's gang.

"Whew!" he croaked. I can't believe it. We did it. We actually did it! **We got rid of Doc Savage!**"

Despite the glee in his voice, it held a note of awe. Great was the average criminal's fear of the *Man of Bronze*.

The other crooks continued to stare down the hatch, a little goggle-eyed. No doubt the more superstitious among them half expected to see the invincible **Doc Savage** rise up like an avenger from the briny deep to strike them all dead. But this did come to pass.

Finally, Bull Pizano broke the spell.

"Hell! He wuz overrated, dat's all," he proclaimed raucously. "C'mon youse guys! We got t'ings to do."

"Like what?" one man wanted to know.

He was one of the survivors of Bull's first mob. He appeared a little more intelligent than the others and evidently had the big bat-wielding thug's ear.

Bull led them up the shaft to the ridge catwalk.

"We gotta clue Blackbird in on dis," he explained as they picked their cautious way forward.

The catwalk beneath their feet made sounds like a banjo being plucked. The huge goldbeater skin ballonets hung on either side like monstrous puffballs imprisoned in the webs of Brobdingnagian spiders. To slip from the catwalk would mean either suffocation in a ruptured gas cell or a fall through the thin envelope and into the sea. *It was not a heartening thought.*

"Foist t'ing we do," Bull continued, "is take over dis overgrown wiener."

"Yeah. The sooner the better," Bull's lieutenant added. "When they find out that Doc Savage is missing, there'll be hell to pay. We can't afford to land in Lond now."

"Say! Dat's right!" Bull ejaculated.

They had descended into the passenger compartments by now. The others followed with their guns held openly in blissful ignorance of the calamity their weapons could wreak.

Bull's pig eyes were narrow with thought.

"We gotta fly dis gas bag to Cape Town ourselves," he decided. "Blackboid can give us a hand landin'."

Grimly, they filed out into the main corridors with Bull leading. They encountered a few passengers. These shrank against the thin walls to let them pass.

In the big airship's lounge, they encountered the first resistance.

They burst into the lounge and their formidable appearances -- not to mention the drawn **guns** -- nearly started a riot. Women screamed! Men moved in front of their loved ones.

A pair of ship's officers turned toward the commotion. Their eyes grew wide with terror at the sight of the potentially explosive weapons.

"Hey!" one screamed. "You can't..."

"We can," Bull Pizano cut in, deep-voiced. "And we're takin' over."

He demonstrated his intentions by knocking unconscious the officer who had spoken with a quick blow to the head.

The other officer -- undaunted -- took up the plea.

"Wait!" he implored. "Don't shoot! Whatever you do, don't fire those guns! **One spark and this craft will become an inferno!**"

This news brought more screams from the terrified passengers. 2 women fainted.

"What's he sayin?" Bull asked of his lieutenant.

The other <snapped> his fingers.

"That's right! Remember -- when we boarded -- they took our matches. The hydrogen gas in those big bags upstairs could go up at the slightest spark! Then ***blooie!*** We're kaput!"

"Yeah?" Bull said. "Well den, if alla youse knows what's good fer ya, youse won't make no funny moves or blooie! Like he sez.

No one moved after that.

"Some of youse guys stay here an' mind da store," Bull ordered. "The resta ya folla me."

They drove on toward the control compartment.

The control room was at the nose of the passenger area which was a long, boat-shaped substructure affixed to the keel of *Aeromunde*. Entry was through a plywood sliding door. The plywood was for lightness -- a necessity in lighter-than-air craft. There were 2 other guards.

The guards stiffened when big Bull Pizano and his men put in an appearance with expressions of grim purpose on their evil faces. Bull was especially hideous with his chewed ear and newly-mashed nose.

he guards were unarmed except for their short hardwood batons (which were something of a cross between a police billy-club and a belaying pin). They brought these up defensively.

Bull Pizano's long baseball bat made short work of the guards and their batons. When he burst into the cramped control room, the bat was glistening *redly* and there was a crack in the thick end.

The captain of the *Aeromunde* was a grizzled, dignified old gentleman who took his job and duties very seriously. His name was Adler.

Captain Adler took one look at Bull Pizano hulking in the open portal, the *bloody* bat, and Bull's dark blob of a face and demanded: "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Bull cocked a thumb at his big jersey-striped chest.

"I'm takin' over. Steer this t'ing fer Cape Town or I start bustin' heads."

The airship captain was about to protest when Bull's men pushed their way in with guns glinting. The captain -- his mien now noticeably paler -- subsided.

"Very well."

He spoke into a speaking tube issuing orders to his officers.

Bells rang. Wheels were spun. The *Aeromunde* changed course. But because of the moderate winds, there was no perceptible difference to those within the air giant.

Presently, Captain Adler turned to Bull Pizano and informed him: "We are now on course for South Africa. But please! You understand that those weapons ... They are dangerous."

"Yeah, I understand," Bull rumbled. "Just see dat you remember too."

The big man deputed two of his gang to guard the control room, then turned to his lieutenant.

"Let's go talk to Blackboid now. He's gonna like what he hears."

The radio room was not far aft. Bull popped in the door so suddenly that the radio operator never knew what it was that picked him up bodily and slammed him against the wall. He woke up hours later with the impression of a grizzly bear uppermost in his mind.

Bull Pizano got the radio going. Soon, Blackbird Hinton's impatient voice came through the coils and vacuum tubes.

"About bloody time you got around to callin in," Blackbird said in a surly tone.

His voice, however, evinced little power in comparison to Bull's thunderous bellow:

"About time nothin'! I've been tryin' to get ya fer days!"

Which was actually an untruth.

"We've been busy," Blackbird offered in a calmer tone.

Then: *"Did you keep that message away from Savage?"*

Bull was about to answer when his lieutenant clapped a hand over the mike.

"What?" Bull growled.

"No. Listen, Bull!" the other interposed. "If you spill the beans that Savage is dead, Blackbird might cut out on us. We need his crew to help land this ship when we make Cape Town."

Bull considered. He took his time. Or perhaps it was that he needed the time to chew over the notion in his mind.

Blackbird said *"Hello? Hello?"* several times impatiently.

Bull Pizano hunched over the mike.

"I'll tell ya about Savage when we get together. I'm on my way in a Zeppelin ..."

"In a what?" Blackbird asked incredulously.

"A Zeppelin. I stole it. And you're gonna help me land it."

Blackbird Hinton was silent for several minutes.

When he spoke again, it was plain that he had developed a newfound respect for his strong-arm associate. He did not ask about Doc Savage again.

Instead: *"When do you expect to get here?"*

"How'm I supposed ta know?" Bull yelled back.

Bull's lieutenant suggested: "Tell him to set up a landing area somewhere and to wait for us."

"You hear dat?" Bull yelled into the mike.

"Yeah."

"Den do it!" Bull ordered.

"Okay," Blackbird said uncomfortably. *"I know just the place. It's a little valley near a town called Paarl. We'll signal you."*

Bull Pizano broke the connection and turned to his right-hand man.

"You could be right at dat. Dat Blackboid'd double-cross his own grundmudder."

The *Aeromunde* sailed through clear weather well into the night. Under the circumstances, it was a relatively peaceful voyage.

The passengers -- along with all nonessential crew and officers -- were herded into the lounge at gunpoint. Only those needed at the controls and a few riggers were allowed to roam the ship.

Bull Pizano spent most of the remaining voyage with "me kits an' me boids" (as he had put it). He recovered the stray canary that Habeas Corpus had fallen upon. But he found no trace of the pet pig although a general search of the airship was conducted.

Bull was feeding his pets from the dirigible's larder when his lieutenant came in with the news that the *Aeromunde* was in the vicinity of Paarl. By this time, it was well into the night and the world below was a dark carpet in which occasional lights twinkled.

As the two passed through into the control room, the other remarked: "You know, Bull, I'm really beginning to believe that Savage is dead."

"What makes ya t'ink he wuzn't?" Bull demanded gruffly.

"You know the reputation that guy has for getting out of scrapes."

"Well, if he wuz still kickin', he'da showed his face by now."

"That's just what I was thinking."

In the control room, Captain Adler was ordering hydrogen valved preparatory to landing.

"We are nearing the hamlet of Paarl," he told Bull Pizano, a bit disdainfully.

"Look fer flares," Bull ordered.

They spotted the flares not many minutes later. The eye-hurting *red lights* sizzled and filled a small cleared valley. The dirigible cut forward speed and sank toward the rubious cup.

Lines were dropped fore and aft. Below, shadowy forms caught them. They attempted to haul the air giant to earth. Without success.

Once, an updraft raised the ship. The men at the lines abruptly found themselves dangling in mid-air. Then the *Aeromunde* sank again.

"I will have to order man down," Captain Adler said. "But I do not think there are enough able-bodied hands to manage a craft of this size."

"We're close enough to jump, Bull," the lieutenant suggested.

"Okay. We jump."

Thus, the technical problem was solved.

Bull Pizano's gang jumped from the control room door, covering the crew as they dropped away. Below, Blackbird Hinton's own men vainly attempted to hold the immense aluminum cigar steady.

Bull Pizano was the last to take his departure after tossing his animals -- and his bat -- down to waiting arms.

He was met by Blackbird Hinton who was still attired in his **black** garments. The latter preened himself in habitual style. King Hancock -- natty as ever -- tagged along.

"I don't know how you did it, Pizano," Blackbird was saying. "But we'd better get the hell outta here because this little stunt of yours ain't about to go unnoticed."

"Do I look worried?" the big thug asked belligerently. He was well aware that the commandeering of the Zeppelin had impressed his boss.

The *Aeromunde* was released. It wobbled unsteadily up into the predawn murk.

The 2 gangs piled into waiting automobiles and began the long drive west to Cape Town. Blackbird Hinton, King Hancock, Bull Pizano, and the latter's lieutenant rode in one machine. The various pets accompanied them.

"Now what about that message?" Blackbird asked. "Did you stop it from reaching Savage?"

"No," Bull said plainly.

Blackbird Hinton flew into a rage! And his temper was not improved by the many cats crawling over the car's interior.

"You failed?" he screeched. He even sounded like a crow.

Then he launched into a long string of blue curses. When he had exhausted his vocabulary, Bull added:

"I stopped Doc Savage."

Blackbird froze, his hands on his coat front.

"Stopped him?"

"Cold."

Bull Pizano smiled a gap-toothed smile.

The giant crook explained the events in New York; the hijacking of the *Aeromunde*; and the subsequent discovery and death of Doc Savage and his men.

When Bull finished, Blackbird Hinton said nothing for a full 2 minutes during which he preened himself nervously. His small bird-like eyes <blinked> rapidly like a man coming out of a dream.

"You sure?" he asked in a small voice.

Bull Pizano ran a thick finger across his neck in an eloquent throat-cutting gesture.

Blackbird swallowed.

"Hard to believe," remarked King Hancock who had been a silent listener to the exchange. "But this clears the road for us."

"So what's dis all about?" Bull suddenly demanded.

Blackbird Hinton ran through the relevant events from the capture of the weirdly-garbed occupants of the **gold**-repaired monoplane to the abduction to the Doc Savage assistant Renny Renwick.

"I don't get it," Bull asserted after Blackbird was done.

Blackbird then produced a number of objects from a pocket. Two were **golden** ornaments (an arm band and hair comb of fine workmanship) and several flat plates (also of the **yellow** metal).

"I took these from the plane," he said. "You can scratch them with your fingernail, they're so soft. These are pure gold."

"Yeah?" Bull said, interestedly.

"The way I figure it, anyone'd use **gold** to repair his plane has got to have a pile of the stuff cached somewhere."

"He's got something there, Bull," the latter's right-hand man pointed out.

"And I'm going to get that **gold** wherever it is!" Blackbird insisted. "So far those two haven't balked. But now that Doc Savage is out of the way, we can pull out all the stops."

"And split the swag 50-50?" Bull suggested meaningfully holding his big scarred bat in his hands.

Blackbird regarded the **stained** bat with mute fascination.

"50-50," he agreed.

There was not much enthusiasm in his voice.

When Blackbird Hinton and company arrived at their Cape Town hideout, they were greeted by news.

"Cap'n, that Zeppelin landed in Cape Town an hour ago according to the radio. There's a hell of a big manhunt on."

Blackbird ran claw-like hands over his coat.

"We gotta get organized," he gritted. "The prisoners talked yet?"

"No," the crewman replied. "We've been workin' over that big guy. But all he does is yell every time we take the gag off. That hollern' of his'd raise the dead. We had to finally give up."

"The others?" King Hancock interjected. "Has Red talked at all?"

"Not him, either. He's takin' his cue from the other one. He told us his name, though. Tom Franklin. I think they're holding out, waitin' to be rescued."

"Hah!" big Bull Pizano snorted. "They'll have a long wait!"

They marched into the other room. There under guard were Renny Renwick, Tom Franklin, and the sloe-eyed beauty in flowing robes.

Blackbird Hinton snapped terse orders.

"You men get the **redhead** and the girl and take them to the ship."

Crewmen complied instantly. The others -- including Bull Pizano and King Hancock -- faced the big engineer who was tied to a stout wooden chair.

The chair somewhat askew, Renny having rocked it with his elephantine bulk until it was near to coming apart.

Blackbird pulled his ebony pistol and aimed its spike snout at Renny's dour face.

"This is your last chance. Tell us where that treasure map is!"

He whipped off the gag.

"Nothing doing," Renny thumped.

Then he began to yell words in an attention-getting voice. A rampaging lion might conceivably have aroused less comment in the neighborhood.

"Doc Savage is dead," Blackbird told Renny.

The latter promptly quieted.

"Holy cow!" he said finally. "It can't be."

Bull Pizano cruelly informed the big-**fisted** engineer of the **Bronze Man's** demise, going into lavish detail.

"There's no one to rescue you now. This is your last chance to talk, horseface," Blackbird jeered.

He <cocked> his weapon elaborately.

Renny Renwick had seen death and the will to murder before in a man's eyes.

He saw it again now in Blackbird Hinton's crow orbs and knew that he was to be killed regardless ...

*Doc Savage -- **giant Man of Metal** -- had made many a dramatic entrance in his lifetime. Indeed, merely by his entering a room, all eyes automatically turned in his direction. There was an arresting quality about the **Big Bronze Man's** presence even in the most ordinary of circumstances.*

Doc Savage entered the room just as Blackbird <cocked> his pistol.

The **bronze giant** wore only the black silk shorts in which Bull Pizano had seen him last aboard the *Aeromunde* when he had presumably fallen into the Atlantic.

His exposed **muscles** -- even in repose -- resembled bundled piano wires lacquered in **bronze**. The **tendons** at his neck and wrists stood out like thick cables. Strange lights played in his **golden eyes**. His countenance might have been the work of a master metalsmith.

"You are my prisoners," the **Bronze Man** said in a steady voice.

It would have sounded humorous that statement had it been spoken by any other.

Doc Savage was nearly nude and obviously unarmed. But such was the commanding power of his presence -- and the psychological effect of his seeming resurrection from the Dead -- that the hardened men in the room froze as if encased in ice.

This tableau lasted long enough for Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks to crash in through the windows behind the group. The melee which followed was brief, violent, and something to see!

Bull Pizano reacted first. he bellowed! Then he hesitated for the briefest of seconds, uncertain over to attack first -- Doc or Monk.

Monk's bull-ape roar decided him and he lunged for the simian chemist. Probably Bull's still-smarting torn ear helped the decision somewhat.

Monk abruptly side-stepped, evidently according to a prearranged plan.

Ham danced in, his sword-cane whirling fiercely.

Bull stopped dead in his tracks. Eyes bugging, he crashed out a handy window.

This exhibition caused great amazement among Blackbird's ranks.

Blackbird Hinton fared poorly himself. A *bronze specter* pounced on his gun hand before he could shoot Renny and disarmed him irresistibly.

Doc's fist drifted out and seemed only to tape Blackbird's temple. But there was a loud *report!* and the *raven*-garbed smuggler found himself in another room.

Monk piled into a clot of men and began laying them out with his scared fists.

Ham pricked several men with his chemical-coated blade. Those men lay down and slept.

With a lusty heave, Renny demolished the chair to which he was tied and slipped from the loosened ropes. He then joined the fracas.

Pandemonium filled the room. No shots were fired owing to the close quarters. Which turned out to be fortunate for all concerned.

It was King Hancock who saved the day for Blackbird and his crew. The natty crook managed to evade the roiling fight and get out a small pistol. He fired this into the air.

"Tear gas!" he yelled, then dived out through a broken window.

There ensued a general panic. Doc, Monk, Ham, and Renny -- busy mixing it with the henchmen -- were mired in struggling forms. The gas to them.

"Not again!" Ham wailed.

They kept fighting. Men went down.

But the *Bronze Man* and his aides were finally forced to vacate the farmhouse. They were choking and nearly blind.

They could hear a number of machines making a getaway. Blackbird Hinton, Bull Pizano, and most of their men.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed when his eyes clear and he surveyed the situation. "This is awful!"

"Yeah," Monk told him. "You're lucky, Big Fists. This is only the first time for you."

Red-eyed, Doc Savage said quietly: "They have too much of a head start on us, I'm afraid, to warrant pursuit."

They checked the farmhouse hideout with moistened handkerchiefs over their faces to protect against gas residue. But their eyes stung nevertheless. They found a number of unconscious men.

All small fry," Monk said disgustedly.

Renny turned to Doc.

"They said you were dead."

The **Bronze Man** -- seemingly unaware of the early-morning *chill* against his exposed skin -- explained.

"We were not, of course, in the motor gondola when it fell. That was a ruse. In fact, we never entered the gondola. Under cover of the smoke bomb, we worked a panel loose and crawled into the tail fins of the *Aeromunde*. These were hollow and large enough to hold us comfortably. We elected to remain there for the remainder of the voyage because of the danger a fight would present to the passengers."

"Except that this accident-of-Nature insisted on sneaking out and retrieving his pig!" Ham complained, referring to Monk who was tickling Habeas Corpus with a toe. The shoat grunted contentedly.

"How did you find me?" Renny inquired.

"When the *Aeromunde* was set free," Ham offered, "we came out of hiding and got off at Cape Town. There was time to contact the local authorities and secure a rented vehicle. The roads were watched for Bull Pizano's convoy and his destination was reported to us. We came as fast as we could."

"And just in time too!" Renny said, feelingly. "Was Bull Pizano that big monster?"

"Big he says!" Monk snorted. "That's a rabbit word to describe that guy."

"He didn't look so tough to me," Renny ruminated.

"Try tanglin' with him some time."

"What's with Monk?" Renny asked in an aside to the **Bronze Man**. "He acts like he's afraid of that Bull characters. Didn't that guy run from Ham?"

"I'm afraid we have all had a rather tough time of it so far," Doc said dryly. "But suppose you bring us up-to-date on your end. We are somewhat in the dark about what is back of this affair."

*Renny then launched into a concise summation of the events which followed the attack on the hydroelectric project that he was superintending including the rather mysterious **redheaded** individual and his companion who seemed to speak no English.*

"Blackbird thinks there's a treasure hidden somewhere," Renny concluded. "And that the scroll is a **treasure map**. Other than that, I don't know any more than you. It's all a big mystery."

Monk snorted!

"It's worse than that. It's a fiasco!"

"What about the scroll you mentioned?" Doc questioned. "Is it still in the machine you left at the Cape Town radio station?"

"We can find out," Renny suggested.

It was.

The machine was where the big engineer had left it.

Renny spaded a big **hand** between the cushions and pulled out the parchment.

"I suggest we go to a hotel and examine this," the Man of Bronze directed.

They drove off in 2 machines -- Renny's and the one that they rented upon their arrival in Cape Town.

X -- Trade-Off

The Cape of Good Hope hotel was the finest hostelry in Cape Town, South Africa. And probably in the whole province.

It was not large compared with the best New York City had to offer. But it more than made up in luxury for what it lacked in size.

Doc Savage and his men had secured the entire upper floor (it was usually reserved for visiting dignitaries) as their makeshift headquarters. They were there now.

Once again attired in a quiet brown business suit, the **Bronze Man** was deep in study. Wasting no time upon arrival, he had immediately gotten down to a minute examination of the mysterious parchment scroll and its bamboo receptacle which they had recovered at Blackbird's hideout.

He had been at that task for several hours. And Monk, Ham, and Renny -- with nothing to do except remain in touch with local authorities over the escaped pirate and his crew -- were growing impatient.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed, his bony **fists** crashing together. "Can you make anything out yet?"

Doc looked up from his study of the parchment which lay stretched out on a table.

"The scroll appears to be inscribed in a language not currently in use. Yet this parchment is of recent manufacture," he said. "The curious thing is that the parchment is of a type also unknown to the modern world."

"You say the 'modern world'?" asked Ham pointedly.

"Yes. The manner in which the animal skin has been cured and pressed is remarkably similar to scrolls dating back to biblical times.

"Good night!" Monk exclaimed. "You mean to say that whoever made that scroll knew how it was done in the old days?"

"I do," Doc agreed.

"Great Scott!" Ham said. "Do you have any idea what that strange script is?"

Doc Savage appeared not to hear.

Ham repeated: "I say, do you ..."

Monk elbowed the impeccably-dressed lawyer.

"Nix, shyster!" he warned. "Can't you see that Doc doesn't want to answer. That means he's on to somethin'!"

Ham refrained from pressing the point. He knew -- as did all of Doc's associates -- about the **Bronze Man**'s often habit (often quite aggravating) of seeming not hear certain questions.

Doc Savage disliked to venture half-formed theories and so kept his thoughts to himself. Usually, this seeming deafness meant that he had stumbled across something of importance.

Doc stood up and turned to Renny.

"The woman who was with the man calling himself Tom Franklin," he began. "How was she dressed?"

Renny thought.

"It's sort of hard to explain. But now that I think about it, she was kinda up like people you see in them Bible pictures.

Doc's trilling -- ethereal and tuneless -- wafted through the room. It might have been the product of the wind and jungle insects in concert. Except that there was no wind and they were far from any jungle.

The trilling ceased abruptly.

"This scroll will require more study," Doc said simply.

He turned to the others.

"In the meantime, it might best if the three of you become active. Ham, you see what the authorities can tell us about this Blackbird Hinton. He may be a local character. Renny overheard him speak about a ship where, presumably, they have the girl. So you might want to look into ships' registries.

"Right-o," Ham snapped and left.

"Monk and Renny, you can pursue this further at police headquarters. Those henchmen taken at Blackbird's hideout can be made to talk. The local authorities have accomplished nothing so far. Try truth serum."

"Gotcha, Doc," Monk replied in his deceptively mild voice. (He only roared when he was excited or angry.)

He picked up his pet pig and -- with Renny in tow -- took his departure.

Doc Savage resumed his examination of the strange parchment which had triggered a fantastic -- but thus far inexplicable -- chain of events.

It was not an hour later that there came a frantic **beating** on the hotel suite door.

A voice -- thin and shrill -- screamed: "**Doc Savage! Doc Savage! Open up! I have to talk to you!**"

Doc whipped to the door and hugged the wall.

Then he set himself and opened the door ...

Tom Franklin -- his hair resembling a bonfire and his clothes in rags -- fell into the suite. The **Bronze Man** caught him in his arms and bore him to a davenport.

The **flame**-haired man was breathing heavily. Despite the cool morning, his freckled face was sheened with *perspiration*. His eyes were wide, glazed.

Doc Savage recognized the symptoms. The man was suffering from the advanced stages of exhaustion. Too, he looked as if he had not eaten in days. Although his rangy build made that difficult to determine.

"Get your wind," the **Bronze Man** enjoined. "Do not attempt to speak."

He left the room to return with a glass of water. Franklin drank this with sobbing gulps, most of the liquid spilling onto his odd garment.

"I...I managed to escape from them," he coughed out. "The papers said you were at this hotel. I-I tried to bring Lha. But it was too risky. You've got to rescue her! They have her on the *Mighty*. It's a tramp steamer ..."

... he paused to suck needed air into his lungs ...

"...anchored in the bay."

"Lha is the girl?" Doc questioned.

"Savage," Franklin panted. "I heard about you all the years I was there ... over the radio ... it was hard to believe the things they said about you. Where I was ... too fantastic to believe ... The World will refuse to accept the truth ..."

Then, he fainted.

Doc Savage lifted the exhausted man and carried him easily into another room where he gave him an injection to insure uninterrupted sleep.

Returning to the parchment scroll, he rolled it up and replaced it in its bamboo receptacle. He rode the elevator to the lobby and left the tube with the desk clerk with instruction that it be placed in the hotel safe and surrendered only to him personally.

Doc drove his rented machine to Cape Town's busy waterfront where he rented a small motor dory from a local fisherman. He sent this craft pattering out into Table Bay.

A tramp steamer rode at anchor over a mile out. It was the only such ship in the bay.

He got within a half-mile of the tub ... discerned the name *Mighty* on its bows -- and cut his engine. Then he stripped down to the black silk shorts he habitually wore beneath his clothes for occasions such as this.

From an equipment case he had brought along, the **Bronze Man** took a piece of apparatus. This was a compact "diving lung" consisting of oxygen tanks, a purifier, a mouthpiece, and tubes. He strapped this on and slipped quietly into the water at the lee side of the dory.

Doc swam underwater toward the tramp. The weight of his tanks kept him below the waves out-of-sight. He paused once to be certain of his bearings and sighted the ship's massive anchor chain. He struck out for that and attached himself to it.

The *bronze giant* climbed the chain, stopping once to let brine run down his gleaming frame and off his legs. He was nearly dry (except for his shorts) when he topped the rail thanks to the water-repellent quality of his **bronze** skin and smooth hair. He hung the "lung" on the chain and left it there.

He slipped over the bow rail and crouched behind a horn-like deck ventilator. His *flake gold eyes* roved alertly. This section of the deck gave every appearance of being deserted. He worked aft.

Doc smelled trouble before he saw it. 2 men crouched under a spread tarpaulin. The wind carried perspiration odor to his sensitive nostrils.

The men leaped up and cast a net in his direction.

The **Bronze Man** dodged. But the expertly-cast net was too wide-flung to fully evade. He was trapped by the weighted skein.

"We got him! We got him!" one of the men exulted.

Others came pounding along the deck which was suddenly alive with commotion.

Doc gripped a section of the net in his corded bronze hands and applied stress. The heavy strands elongated, parted. He shook himself free of the encumbrance.

The 2 crewmen ran. "He's loose! He's loose!" they yelled frantically.

A rifle *whacked* aft. But no bullet came near.

Doc pitched down the nearest companion, bowling over 3 men as he negotiated the passage. Stale cooking smells greeted him. That meant a galley.

He flashed toward the odor ...

Doc Savage got a needed break. The galley proved to be deserted.

He barricaded himself within. Above, feet trampled the deck. There were yells, confusion. Bull Pizano's bellowing voice was audible. But his words were indistinguishable.

Doc rummaged around. There were cooking utensils -- pots, pans, even big cutting knives -- but he rejected these. Huge kegs held potatoes and flour, the latter infested with weevils. Somewhere a rat scuttled.

Finally, Doc selected a pair of hurricane lanterns. He removed these from their gimbals ... gathered paper and rag waste before the door ... and poured kerosene from the lamps onto the waste. A kitchen match supplied *flame*.

With a roaring *whoosh*, a small conflagration commenced. Oily smoke poured from this and quickly filled the galley.

When enough *smoke* had been generated, the *Bronze Man* whipped open the door and made for another room. He barricaded himself within.

Meanwhile, choking *smoke* rolled down the companionway like a blacksnake seeking a mouse. It billowed onto the *Mighty's* deck and became the object of considerable attention.

Soon, the cry dread by all seamen -- "*Fire in the hold!*" -- broke out. Doc Savage listened below.

Blackbird Hinton -- assisted by the cool King Hancock -- was shouting orders. Men raced down the companionway coughing and braving the unbreathable *pall*. A bucket brigade was quickly organized.

Under cover of the *sepia* stuff, Doc slipped down the companion. He held his breath and shut his eyes, using only his sense of touch and hearing for navigation. He edged cautiously (within arm's reach of the bucket line!) to another portion of the ship.

The *smoke* was only a haze here. But it still smarted the eyes. Doc kept his *golden* orbs pinched almost shut. But they stung regardless.

The 2 men guarding the stateroom door had a similar problem. They were cursing their unpleasant situation when Doc turned the corner on bare feet. They did not see him.

He paused. His throat muscles constricted.

Then in a remarkable imitation of Blackbird Hinton's voice, he shouted:

"You men! Get topside! I need you! Don't worry about the girl. She'll keep."

In addition to sounding like the diamond smuggler, the voice seemed to come from the opposite direction from where Doc Savage crouched like a great tawny cat. Long years of training enabled the *Bronze Man* to mimic almost any voice after hearing it but once. He had merely "thrown" his imitation of Blackbird Hinton like a ventriloquist so that it appeared as if the men were being summoned from deck.

The crewmen complied. They were pleased to be out of the smoke.

Doc glided up to the stateroom door. It was locked. He put his hard *bronze* shoulder to it ... gave a shove ... and the lock broke cleanly.

There was a woman inside. Which came as a no surprise to him. The guards obviously signified that a prisoner that a prisoner was within.

She leaped to her feet at the sign of the *bronze giant*. Her pretty lips worked. But her words were not in English.

Doc halted, his *trilling* faintly audible. He was fluent in virtually all known languages. But his reply was stilted, somewhat halting.

The girl nodded eagerly and broke into voluble speech. Doc silenced her with a gesture.

The **Bronze Man** went to a porthole. It was old and **rusted** shut.

He took hold of it firmly. It came out like a rotten tooth.

Portholes in most ships are small. This was a little larger than most. But still not wide enough to admit most men. However, the girl would fit.

He faced her squarely and by a series of hand gestures made it clear that he wanted her to jump.

The girl (she still wore her long purple-and-white robe) hesitated. But Doc Savage made imperative gestures! Not far away, Bull Pizano could be heard shouting.

He boosted the girl through finally. Then he was out of the stateroom and into the passage before the *splash* came.

Bull Pizano loomed up suddenly in the **smoke**.

"Savage!" he yelled. "I know yer down ..."

He never completed the sentence.

Something struck him with the approximate *force* of a locomotive and left him stunned as it hurtled by.

Doc Savage reached the deck unmolested. He veered away from the milling crew. The **smoke** made that feat easy. He went over the rail.

He struck the water cleanly with a minimum of splash. His powerful frame curved expertly an instant after the moment of impact and the result was a perfect shallow dive. He seemed scarcely to wet his back.

He struck out for the girl.

The young vision in purple-and-white was floundering in the water. Probably more from momentary confusion than lack of swimming ability, the **Bronze Man's** practiced eye informed him.

Doc wrapped a tendon-cabled arm under her chin in the accepted rescue method and -- one-handed - - swam toward his dory which had drifted closer to the *Mighty* with the outgoing tide.

They reached the boat without incident. Plainly, the crew of the tramp steamer -- who had obviously laid a trap for the **Bronze Man**, knowing that the escaped Franklin would report the girl's whereabouts - - were still busy with galley fire which was visible as a **black worm** burrowing out of the *Mighty*.

With his companion shivering beside him, Doc Savage headed the motor dory to shore.

He returned the boat to the owner's slip and escorted the girl to his waiting machine. She balked at entering the car and suddenly broke away. He pegged after her ... caught up ... and found it necessary to carry her bodily back to the auto.

Passerbys stared. Which embarrassed the *bronze giant* no end.

He was obliged to apply *pressure* to his captive's spinal nerves in order to load her into the machine.

Then he drove back to his hotel.

If Doc Savage derived any satisfaction from his successful rescue of Blackbird Hinton's last prisoner, that feeling was dashed when he entered his suite carrying the girl.

The door was ajar. The outer room was a shambles. Furniture had been overturned.

He placed the girl on a davenport and briskly searched the suite.

Tom Franklin was missing. Doc found Habeas Corpus hiding under a bed. That meant that Monk Mayfair had returned in his absence.

The **Bronze Man** found Ham Brooks' cane. There was a note attached. It read:

You were slick, Savage. But not slick enough.

I radioed some of my boys to grab your friends after you pulled that caper on the Mighty. We got them and Franklin, too.

We only let Franklin escape to trap you anyway.

Here's the deal.

Give us the treasure map and the girl. Then you can have your men back. You'll hear from us.

The note was signed (obviously by proxy) "**Blackbird**".

XI -- Tale of Ophir

The first thing that Doc Savage did upon reading the note left by Blackbird Hinton's raiders was to place an immediate call to the Cape Town authorities to learn if Monk, Ham, or Renny had been there.

They had according to the Constable that he spoke with.

"Your men did in 10 minutes what we couldn't do in 3 hours," the constable reported. "They were able to learn the location of these kidnappers using that truth drug. Then they departed."

"Where are these kidnappers hold up?" Doc asked.

"On a tramp steamer called the Mighty anchored out in the bay. It is registered to a suspected diamond smuggler named Edward Hinton. We just had a report from a cutter we sent out to investigate that there was a fire aboard the Mighty and she is headed out to sea. I'm afraid that only a seaplane could catch her now. And we have none available."

Doc thanked the constable and hung up.

He next called the front desk and inquired if any suspicious persons had been seen in the vicinity. None had. He got another reply when he asked about his 3 assistants.

"I've not seen your men since they returned less than an hour ago."

Doc instructed the desk clerk to have the bamboo tube sent up to his suite.

While he awaited the mysterious length of bamboo, he placed a quick transatlantic call. He got a British manufacturer of aircraft.

He identified himself and purchased a new amphibious tri-motor. The individual at the other end was deferential and promised to have the plane flown directly to Cape Town, there to await the **Bronze Man's** convenience.

Doc terminated the conversation.

A bellboy arrived with the bamboo tube moment later. Doc accepted the tube. He tipped the boy (the latter's eyes about bugged out of his head at the sight of the **bronze giant!**) and extracted the contents.

He examined the flexible parchment scroll with the aid of his all-purpose optical gadget. Aside from being a handy periscope and telescope, the device could be converted into a magnifying glass or microscope. He re-examined the odd tube, first with the microscope arrangement and then with the single lens.

Doc unrolled the parchment. The sinister serpent in the wax seal jumped out under the glass. He held either end in a big **metallic** hand. On the roll were many blocks of writing as if the texts of several pages had been reduced and set side-by-side along the length of the parchment.

He pondered these again. The words spoken by girl earlier had furnished him with proof that certain suspicions of his regarding the cabalistic writing were on the right track. Even so, the deciphering of the text would consume many precious hours.

Abruptly, Doc stood up and went over to the girl. She was still sleeping peacefully.

He paused a moment, struck by her radiant loveliness ...

... then rested 2 hard fingers at the base of her neck under her black hair. He kneaded the spot deliberately.

The girl roused from her slumber. Doc had removed the pressure causing unconsciousness. She looked up at him with wide luminous eyes. She started.

He pronounced low words, not in English. His handsome **bronze** face framed a quiet smile. His **golden eyes** exerted a quelling effect. This calmed the strange girl instantly and she sat up. Her lips framed a query:

"Are you the Wizard Barbarian?" she asked in her odd tongue.

"The Wizard Barbarian?" The **Bronze Man** was puzzled. At first, he thought he must have misunderstood the language.

"Yes. Tom Franklin brought me to the Outer World to seek the aid of the Wizard Barbarian. I am Queen Lha. The Wizard Barbarian of whom I speak is known by another name".

She stumbled over the pronunciation.

"Doc Savage."

For the briefest of moments, Doc's mellow **trilling** broke forth.

But the **Bronze Man** caught himself. Queen Lha -- not realizing that the resonance emanated from him -- looked about puzzledly.

Understanding dawned on him. In primitive lands, wizards often act as doctors. And the word "barbarian" translated to "savage". The "Wizard Barbarian" was a rough translation of his own name.

"I am Doc Savage," he admitted quietly.

"I am pleased to meet so great a man," Queen Lha said.

She drew herself up proudly.

"I have come to entreat your aid against an evil monster."

"Blackbird Hinton?" Doc suggested.

Queen Lha shook her attractive head. Despite her soaked and soiled garments, she assumed a regal demeanor.

"No," she replied in her own language. "Although he is an evil one, too. I speak of Tau the sorcerer. He has stolen my throne. He is hungry for power and has cast spells over my friends and allies.

"Hagai was the last. She is an old woman. She raised me. When the **Invisible Wrath** fell upon her frail shoulders, I knew I was doomed."

She shuddered, her eyes reflecting pain.

"The Invisible Wrath?"

"A spell of madness from which there is no awakening," Queen Lha supplied. "Taxus calls his **Invisible Wrath** down and his victims lose their minds. It is horrible. I had no one to turn to but Tom Franklin.

"He had fallen from the sky inside a metal bird years before and lived among us while he sought to bring his bird back to life. I know nothing of this magic. But Tom Franklin had heard of you from his talking box which spoke from the Outer World and said that if we sought your aid, you would help us."

Doc considered. Obviously she was referring to Tom Franklin's plane and his radio set.

Suddenly, he ventured a question:

"What have Blackbird Hinton and his men to do with this?"

Queen Lha said: "They captured us. But Tom Franklin escaped their boat to seek you out. Blackbird Hinton wants us to lead him to *Python Isle*. This where I rule as queen. Or did rule before Taxus worked his wizardry."

"Why does Blackbird desire the location of *Python Isle*?" the **Bronze Man** asked.

"For the same reason that Taxus has stolen my throne," Queen Lha returned. "**He covets the ancient treasure of Ophir.**"

This time, Doc Savage could not restrain himself.

His strange *trilling* pervaded the room once again full-voiced, running wildly up-and-down the scale without tune. His *flake-gold eyes* seemed to revolve excitedly.

Ophir! The fabulous lost land mentioned in the Bible! The supposed treasure trove of the ancient world!

Doc had heard of it. What man had not? Ophir had been a riddle for thousands-of-years. A lure to adventurers down through the ages.

According to biblical legends, Solomon -- King of the Israelites -- regularly traded with the people of a land called Ophir. This place was reputedly rich in rare woods, precious spices, stones, and -- most of all -- **Gold**! The wealth gotten from commerce with Ophir was supposed to be the source of wise King Solomon's riches.

The true location of Ophir had been lost in the mists of history, Doc knew. But the lure of its wealth was not forgotten. In the 16th Century while the Spanish conquistadors plundered South America in quest of the fabled El Dorado, Portuguese conquistadors were vainly searching the Near East for Ophir. Since that time, fortune seekers had sought the place unsuccessfully in Arabia, Africa, and even India.

Doc put a terse question to the bewildered Queen Lha:

"You have come from Ophir?"

"No," Queen Lha replied with a trace of disdain. "Ophir was a savage place. My ancestors were subjects of great King Solomon who founded a colony in the land of Ophir. There, we lived in peace for many years and oversaw the flow of trade to our true home. But time passed, wise Solomon died, and the trading fell into decline.

"Cut off from supplies, the colony fell prey to savage tribes. They drove us out. We -- that is, my ancestors -- fled in boats with all the **gold** we could bear away. But our navigators were killed and we lost our way. Finally, our history tells us that a terrible storm carried those boats which could stay together to **Python Isle**."

"And your people have remained on **Python Isle** for thousands of years?" Doc Savage asked, almost incredulously.

Queen Lha nodded her attractive head.

"**Python Isle** is surrounded by almost unending storms. No boats could escape the island. In time, my ancestors ceased to build boats or even to think of leaving. **Python Isle** became our home. It wasn't until Tom Franklin ..."

Just then, the phone in Doc's hotel suite rang. It caused the girl to jump.

He scooped up the receiver and identified himself.

"Savage? You got the message?"

It was Blackbird Hinton's vicious voice.

"I did," the **Bronze Man** stated evenly.

There was no hint of anger in malleable voice. But his **golden eyes** were molten.

"Then listen good. You have the girl and the treasure map. We got everyone else. Even swap. How 'bout it?"

There was a pause. Queen Lha regarded the **Bronze Man** passively.

"What are your terms?" Doc said at last.

"In 10 minutes," Blackbird rasped, "the girl walks out of the hotel. Alone. With the map. Got that? A car will pick her up. Your men will be set loose when we have the girl. I'm keepin' Franklin."

"That is not much of a deal," Doc Savage said. "How do I know you will keep your part of the bargain?"

"You don't!" Blackbird sneered. "But you'd better make up your mind quick. I can't keep Bull from tearin' into that Monk swab forever."

As if to accentuate his threat, there came a squawk of *agony* through the receiver and the cruel laugh of Bull Pizano.

"Hear that?" Blackbird demanded.

Then he hung up.

Doc Savage turned to Queen Lha, a little grim.

"Blackbird Hinton has Tom Franklin and friends of mine," he informed her in her own language.

Queen Lha then did something characteristic of women from all ages upon hearing disheartening news.

Her hand flew to her mouth which had widened in surprise. "Tom Franklin," she moaned. It was clear that she had feelings for the **redheaded** man.

"Blackbird wants you and the scroll in exchange for my friends," Doc stated.

Queen Lha stiffened. "What will you do?"

In the same language (it was a peculiar dialect of ancient Hebrew) but haltingly, Doc replied: "I have a plan whereby I can free you and my men from Blackbird's clutches. If you will trust me."

"Tom Franklin said you were a good man, a great man," Lha said bravely. "I will trust you."

"Good," Doc said. "There is little time."

The **Bronze Man** whipped to one of his equipment cases. They had been damaged during the abduction of Monk, Ham, and Renny. But their contents had not been harmed.

He produced a spray device consisting of a short hand-pump of the type used to expel insecticides. A glass container in which a clear liquid *sloshed* was affixed to this.

Doc took the pump to a window overlooking the hotel's entrance. He carefully eased the window up. Street bustle entered the room. He sprayed a fine *mist* out into the street.

He repeated this action at each of the windows along that wall as Queen Lha watched with open incomprehension.

Then Doc took up the parchment ... worked it into a roll ... and inserted it in the bamboo cylinder. With his back to Queen Lha, he busied himself with the length of bamboo for some minutes. When he was done, he surrendered the tube to the girl.

"Blackbird called this a treasure map," he stated. "Why?"

"He has not seen it. But he knows it to be important," she told him. "He does know of the **gold** and so must have assumed that it tells where it may be found. The parchment is really a script history of my people which I took from the royal library. We brought it to show you. To prove that *Python Isle* truly exists."

The **Bronze Man** nodded. He had deduced as much.

"I am to set you free," Doc stated. "Blackbird's men will take you away from them. But I will follow as best I can. When they take you to where Franklin and the others are being held, you will **smash** the bamboo tube against the nearest hard object.

"**Smash** the bamboo tube?"

"Yes. Endeavor to keep it in your possession until then. Do not try to understand. Just do this thing for me."

Queen Lha nodded. "I will do this thing for you."

"Good," Doc said, pleased.

He called for a bellboy to escort her to the lobby. He did not wish to walk into a trap himself. He reasoned that the girl would easily become lost in finding her way out of the massive hostelry alone.

Doc Savage observed Queen Lha emerge onto the pavement minutes later.

2 men fell upon her instantly. They escorted her to a waiting touring car. The machine (it was an unpalatable yellow hue) roared off in the direction of the ring of mountains buttressing Cape Town.

Doc waited a full minute before riding the elevator down to the street. Habeas Corpus trotted happily in his way. The **Bronze Man** carried one of his equipment cases to his waiting car and drove off in the same direction as the ugly yellow phaeton.

He picked up the tire tracks immediately. It was not difficult. He had donned a pair of odd-looking goggles which he had taken from the equipment case. The lenses of these were as large as condensed-milk cans.

Next, he placed one of the ultraviolet-ray projectors on the dash so that it cast its invisible light on the road ahead.

Through the goggles, he could see a pair of blue *lines* on the road as if someone had hastily dipped 2 brushes in luminous paint and dragged them along the ground. These were really the tracks of the phaeton. The explanation for this phenomenon was a simple one.

Back at his hotel, he had sprayed a fast-spreading chemical into the air where it was dispersed as microscopic particles onto the pavement. These were impregnated with a substance which *glowed* under the black light (like the special chalk used by him and his aides to leave messages). Driving over the sticky stuff, the yellowing touring car had picked up these particles in its tire treads. The **Bronze Man** was following this trail.

He drove at a decorous pace. He did not sight his quarry. Nor did he wish to. Fortunately, traffic leaving the city was light. So there were no other luminous tracks on the road which the yellow machine had taken.

He had known this would be the case in advance. Otherwise, he would have employed another trailing method. He had several. This seemingly limitless bag of scientific tricks was one of the secrets of his success. And of his survival.

The trail led to a road which wound between Devil's Peak and Table Mountain and away from the city. Beyond was the treeless expanse of the Karroo with its shrubs and tall grasses. Roads became dirt trails. Farms and vineyards flashed by.

He followed for several miles. The *glowing* particles began to thin. They were not limitless. But the machine itself would fluoresce until washed. It would be easy to spot.

Doc Savage spotted the plane first, however. He braked immediately.

The plane was a small 2-motored job. It was equipped for amphibious landing but sat on a field not far distant. Dusk had settled and the aircraft's lights spread a calcium **whiteness** around it. Because his car had been running without its own lights, he did not fear immediate detection.

"Stay out of sight, Habeas," Doc told the pig.

The remarkable creature got under the driver's seat as he quitted the machine and began to work through the shrubs surrounding the open field. Concealment was not difficult. Cape Marquis shrubs average about 6 feet and are thick-leaved. But it was tough going where progress was concerned.

When he got within earshot, the first thing he overheard was the voice of Blackbird Hinton announcing: "Now that we got the girl and everything, there's no sense in keepin' these lubbers alive anymore."

He was referring, of course, to Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, and Renny Renwick who sat bound-and-gagged in an open car near the plane. Blackbird, King Hancock, Bull Pizano, and their various satellites were standing about with guns in hand.

Tom Franklin -- looking somewhat more bruised and *bloodied* than when Doc had seen him last -- stood with them, his hands tied behind his back. Next to him was Queen Lha, one arm in dapper King

Hancock's firm grasp. She still retained the bamboo tube, Doc perceived, and her sloe orbs shifted frequently to the hard fender of the yellow phaeton.

Doc waited until her arm tensed before he shouted.

The bamboo cylinder splintered against the yellow-painted metal! Bull Pizano reacted loudly ... then suddenly keeled over.

King Hancock was next. Followed by Queen Lha. Tom Franklin completed the picture.

Blackbird Hinton squawled "*Gas!*" in a frightened voice and backpedaled frantically to the idling plane.

The plane's props surged into life. Which was unfortunate because it had the effect of dispelling the quick-acting anesthetic that had been released when Queen Lha broke the bamboo tube. The gas was in thin-walled glass bulbs that Doc Savage frequently employed.

The **bronze giant** whipped forward and flashed to the car where his men sat helpless and exposed. They were still conscious, however, having heard Doc's command in Mayan to hold their breaths. The gas had the property of mixing with oxygen and losing its strength in a short time.

He reached the open machine. Both Lha and Franklin slept inside it. He got beside them just as the first bullets kicked up gouts of dirt at his feet.

Doc plunged a hand into King Hancock's Prince Albert coat and came away with a pistol. He brought this up, sighted, and fired in one motion. It broke the gun arm of a sniper. Despite his policy of personally never carrying a firearm, the **Man of Bronze** was nevertheless an extraordinary marksman.

Most of the Blackbird crew had retreated to the plane and were massed under its wings and behind pontoons. The others -- overcome by gas -- freckled the field.

"**Scrag him!**" Blackbird Hinton yelled from the cabin door and took a shot at the **Bronze Man** himself.

2 well-placed return shots drove him back into the aircraft.

While the others were getting themselves organized, Doc heaved Tom Franklin and Queen Lha into the open machine. He slid behind the wheel and got the car traveling.

He hated to run. But his men and the others were helpless to defend themselves against stray bullets.

By the time he had gotten out of range and had stopped his rented machine, slugs had knocked the glass from the windshield and gnashed the car's spare tire. But no one was hurt.

Doc hastily freed his men.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed excitedly. "They're getting' away!"

The **Bronze Man** looked.

He saw several men piling King Hancock and the others into the vibrating plane. It took 6 men to heft big Bull Pizano. They almost left him behind.

The plane got rolling and bumping along the field, its wings making the flapping motion characteristic of all-metal craft.

"It's blamed unfair!" Renny howled. "They got the drop on me back at the hotel. I never got a chance to tangle with that Bull palooka."

He sounded disappointed to the point of tears.

The plane vaulted into the sky and flue due West until the bawl of its motors became lost in the distance.

Doc Savage finished freeing his men.

"That sinks us," Monk complained loudly when he was loose.

Doc looked at the homely chemist.

"How so?"

"Before you got here," Monk snorted, "they forced that Franklin goof to talk. He gave them the location of some place called Python Isle.

"And that's where they're all headed -- *Python Isle!*"

XII -- Python Isle

It is a popular -- but erroneous -- belief that the monsoon of the Tropics is a species of particularly violent storm. This is not exactly the case.

The "monsoon" is the term given to an atmospheric condition found primarily in the Indian Ocean for which Science has yet to find an explanation. It is actually nothing more than a wind. One which blows in one direction for 6 months. It is not a continuous wind but a prevailing one.

This wind helps drive sailing craft wishing to travel in the same direction as itself. But it inhibits progress when attempts to against it. Traders in the Indian Ocean are wont to regulate their lives by the monsoon. (Or -- rather -- their lives are regulated by it.) When it is blowing South, they will ride it down and peddle their wares in other countries, not venturing homeward again until the wind blows North once more.

It happens that sometimes the monsoon gets tangled up in other winds. Then certain atmospheric conditions result. These are not entirely understood. But their effects are the dreaded monsoon storms. Violent, hurricane-strong winds charged with torrential rains.

These monsoon storms were uppermost in Doc Savage's mind as he piloted his new amphibious tri-motor over the Indian Ocean.

They had left Cape Town the previous evening. It was now dawn. The east coast of Africa was far behind now. Ahead lay the vast southern expanse of the Indian Ocean where Tom Franklin -- with curious reluctance -- had told them *Python Isle* lay.

There, too, lurked a region of unending monsoon disturbances, he had added discouragingly.

Doc Savage kept a wary eye ahead. Sky and sea were twin convergences of undisturbed azure, seemingly too peaceful for storm activity. But he knew how suddenly storms at sea can materialize.

Renny Renwick was acting as copilot and navigator. The others -- Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Queen Lha, and Tom Franklin -- occupied the passenger compartment.

Judging by the sounds emanating from the rear, Monk and Ham had resumed their perpetual squabbling. (Probably to catch the attention of the comely Queen Lha with whom both of them had been smitten.) The racket became so undurable that the pig Habeas Corpus -- who had managed to survive everything so far -- ambled forward to go to sleep in the soundproofed cockpit.

In the copilot bucket, Renny was working over a chart. He was complaining (not for the first time) about the head start that Blackbird Hinton's plane had gotten.

"That Blackbird has had time to reach Python Isle by now," he rumbled, his face expressing its usual disapproval. "If only we hadn't had to wait for this blamed plane to reach Cape Town."

Doc Savage said nothing. The several hours of delay while the tri-motor was ferried to Cape Town had been aggravating. But he had borne it stoically. He had put the time to good use conversing with Queen Lha and learning more of her story.

"Are you sure this gal's goofy story is straight, Doc?" Renny asked suddenly.

"Her story does sound fantastic," the **Bronze Man** admitted. "But it is undeniably true. She speaks an archaic dialect of the Hebrew language which survives from King Solomon's day. It is fortunate that I am fluent enough in the modern version to understand most of it. As it was, the scroll in her possession was almost beyond my ability to translate. Writings from Biblical times are generally not known to survive."

Doc had managed to recover the parchment intact. With Queen Lha's help, he had begun to understand bits of it. Enough to convince him of the existence of a lost colony from Ophir.

"What I can't understand," Renny grumbled, "is where this Franklin character fits in. First, he's looking for help. And the next, he's shut up like a kicked clam."

It was true. The **flame-haired** Tom Franklin had fallen into a sullen silence upon being rescued by Doc Savage. He had broken this only to convey the approximate location of *Python Isle* -- information he had previously imparted to Blackbird Hinton under torture.

Franklin bore the marks of considerable physical punishment (no doubt inflicted by Bull Pizano). He lacked several teeth; had collected multitudinous ugly bruises; and his upper lip had all-but-been obliterated.

The wretched state of the man had induced pity and his men and they had not pressed him. But Franklin's attitude had changed to one of resentment toward the **Bronze Man** and the others. It was thoroughly puzzling.

"Just who is he, I wonder?" Renny asked.

The giant engineer was surprised when Doc Savage showed that he knew.

"He has refused to explain his part in all this. But it is obvious that he is the same Tom Franklin who disappeared in the Indian Ocean in 1927."

Renny crashed his case-hardened **fists** together.

"I remember now! Wasn't he trying for a nonstop hop from Australia to Cape Town?"

"The same," Doc agreed. "He must have become lost or been blown off course to end up as far south as *Python Isle* is supposed to lie."

"*Python Isle* ...," Renny repeated. "Just the name gives me the shivers."

It was not quite Noon when the dark smudge appeared on the horizon. It looked just like what would have resulted if a small boy had smeared a piece of dirty coal across the cockpit windows.

The smear grew and darkened.

"Tell the others we are in for a rough time," Doc instructed Renny.

*The big-**fisted** engineer returned in a moment.*

"They're warned. Monk is lookin' forward to it."

"Monk may wish he were tangling with Bull Pizano again before this is over."

"Renny -- who had yet to go up against the big thug -- muttered: "I don't see what all the durn fuss over this Pizano guy is about."

Doc did not enlighten him.

The monsoon storm hit like a giant darksome **fist**. Or so it seemed. Actually, the trim-motor flew smack into it.

Rain sheeted against the windows in a gray torrent. The windshield wipers rocked lazily in a useless effort to clear the glass. The blade on Renny's side suddenly vanished. The big engineer scarcely noticed. The amphibian was vibrating alarmingly.

His face a study of metallic grimness, Doc Savage gripped the control strenuously. The ship bucked and fought him.

Once, a downdraft sucked them abruptly earthwards. They had a bad moment before Doc regained altitude. It was impossible to determine how close they had come to the waves.

They were flying through a world of ugly, violent, oyster-hued water. Rain raced along the fuselage and wings like clear wax drippings along a candlestick.

Then as abruptly as it began, the storm abated.

It did not entirely subside. The wind died but the rain remained. A dreary curtain of hammering strings against the amphibian.

They sighted *Python Isle* not many moments later.

The first they noticed was the shape of the island.

It was a round as a pie plane, an unnatural phenomenon. The isle possessed a diameter of perhaps 5 miles, the **Bronze Man** judged. The most unusual aspect of the weird place, however, was its topography.

The island was shaped like a serpent coiled in on itself and resting in shallow water.

"Holy cow!" Renny exploded when the nature of the isle become apparent. "It ain't possible!"

Surely, it seemed not. The rim of ***Python Isle*** rose up in a gentle swell from the water. There was no shore, no beach at all.

Possibly a mile inland, the ground swelled up again as it did several times more. These swells were remindful of monster coils although they were not smooth, being covered with mangrove trees near the ocean and jungle farther inland. There were even some cultivated fields. Banana groves, bamboo stands, and the like.

Like some fantastic reptilian head, the city stood on the flat hill in the isle's center. From the air, it was a walled arrangement of white stone structures in which a darker building predominated. Completing the picture was a jetty of rocks curling out of the north edge of the island.

"Looks like a rattlesnake," Renny opined gloomily.

Tom Franklin poked his battered face forward.

"This is it," he said unnecessarily.

"Where can we land?" Doc Savage asked.

Franklin slanted a skinny brown arm ahead.

"See that dark patch west of the city? It's a valley. That's where I landed 7 years ago."

"Enough room for this bird?" Renny demanded.

"If you know how to fly, it is," Franklin replied.

"We know how to fly," Renny rumbled.

As if to prove the big engineer's words, Doc Savage banked the tri-motor sharply and took it low over the valley. The latter proved to be a wide, deep groove in one of the coil-like elevations that made up the island's weird topography. It was bare of vegetation. Possibly the result of erosion or human excavation.

It was also barely long enough to accommodate landing the huge aircraft. Nevertheless, the **Bronze Man** cranked down the landing wheels.

Doc Savage brought the big metal bird around. He cut air speed and dropped the ship. It descended on the valley under his capable guidance.

Renny had his neck craned forward.

"I don't see any sign of Blackbird's bus," he said doubtfully.

Doc -- intent on his flying -- said nothing.

The valley loomed ahead. They were close enough to the ground that it flashed under their wings alarmingly, giving the impression that they were moving faster rather more slowly. Doc expertly "fishtailed" the plane to further reduce momentum.

The tri-motor touched ground ... struck a tock ... bounced ... and hit again several yards distant. The far end of the valley was a sheet wall of dirt.

It raced toward them.

"We're gonna hit!" Renny yelled in alarm.

But it didn't happen.

Doc braked the craft hard ... saw that it was not enough ... then released on wheel. The tri-motored veered and lost more speed. It finally came to rest with its flank to the valley's end. The right wing had gouged into the dirt wall. The dirt was soft. The wind was undamaged.

Tom Franklin unglued himself from the door frame behind the control buckets.

"You can flight, all right," he admitted.

His voice was weak.

When they disembarked, the group was pleased to discover that the rain had ceased entirely. The Sun poked through parting clouds while they loosened their muscles which had cramped after the long flight. To the south and west, the sky remained dark and angry.

"It is always like this," Queen Lha told Doc Savage in ancient Hebrew. "The storms never go away entirely."

"What say we investigate this place, Doc?" Monk suggested.

The apish chemist had Habeas Corpus and was swinging him around by both ears to limber up. The pig seemed to enjoy the activity.

Ham Brooks stood off to one side, a little green from motion sickness. Which was unusual. Most of the time, it was Monk who was prone to such distress.

Doc Savage addressed Queen Lha in her own language.

"There is no sign of Blackbird Hinton's aircraft. He may have become lost or failed to weather the storm. We will approach the city peacefully and perhaps be able to head off any deviltry should he arrive later."

The beauteous Queen Lha nodded her agreement.

Tom Franklin (who understood the ancient tongue) muttered: "I'm more worried about what Taxus has been up to. He's a devil. And worse besides!"

They sat out after Monk, Ham, and Renny had armed themselves with the compact superfirers.

Ham carried his habitual sword-cane that was recovered from their Cape Town suite. He had donned fresh clothes which quickly absorbed moisture from the soaked foliage.

That caused Monk to snort: "I always said you were all wet, shyster."

"You're just cranky from hunger," Ham retorted waspishly. "But don't fret. I saw plenty of bananas before we landed."

"Holy cow!" Renny groused. "If them two don't knock off that jabbering, I might just go up and mistake them both for a pair of bananas myself and start peeling!"

He said it **loudly** enough that the quarrelsome pair the complaint. Monk and Ham subsided.

Doc Savage led the procession. Queen Lha and Tom Franklin followed closely behind. Monk, Ham, and Renny brought up the rear. And Habeas Corpus playfully crashed in-and-out of the jungle.

The jungle itself was a remarkable profusion of flora. Coconut and raffia palms abounded. Here-and-there reared up the thick scarred boles of rubber trees leaking sluggish white sap. Yet nowhere was the growth so thick that they could not walk freely where they wanted.

Presently, they found themselves in a banana grove. A frightful *squealing* came from somewhere in the grove.

"Habeas!" Monk squawled, looking around frantically. "He's not here!"

The simian chemist hastily disappeared into the foliage.

The others followed at a brisk trot. They could hear a mighty threshing coming from where Monk had gone.

Then the homely chemist's voice croaked: "*Yeeow! Habeas!*"

Doc Savage overhauled the others and reached the scene first. He was brought up short by a grisly sight.

A huge **python** -- fully 20 feet long with coils as big around as a lamp-post -- had ensnared a frightened animal. A pig!

The giant serpent had looped itself once around the squealing porker. With a length of fallen bamboo in one **rusty** fist, Monk Mayfair was jumping around madly attempting to beat off the snake.

"Monk!" Doc rapped. "Stop ..."

The burly chemist only howled wrathfully. He ignored the **Bronze Man** and tried to swat the weaving ophidian head. The python was several different shades of dust and mud. Its head ducked and swayed before him while it exerted awful *pressure* on the pig.

The *Man of Bronze* swept in ... disarmed the burly chemist ... and shoved him clear.

Monk scrambled back, his face a picture of horror. Doc got in front of him.

"Habeas ..." Monk moaned in a sick voice.

"Monk! That is not Habeas," Doc said levelly.

Monk's jaw dropped ludicrously.

"Not ... Habeas ... Corpus ..." he gulped.

"No," Doc stated gently. "His squeal is different. The python must have captured a wild pig."

The others tore into view then. Habeas Corpus was with them.

The shoat ran up to the homely chemist like a friend dog.

"Habeas!" Monk yelled. "Hog, am I glad to see you!"

While he fussed over his pet, the others regarded the python with rapt attention.

The great snake (2 enormous ridges of *muscle* ran down its ugly brown back) was calmly squeezing the pig to death. The process was almost hypnotic.

Pythons do not crush their victims as is commonly believed. Rather they suffocate them. Each time the pig exhaled, the serpent constricted on the animal's reduced chest diameter, making lung expansion impossible. The pig could only exhale.

With each expelling of breath, the python clamped down even more. Finally -- unable to respire -- the pig expired.

The brown python uncoiled its monster length and brought its head around. Its jaws opened with an audible **pop!** They actually dislocated so that its relatively small mouth could admit the shoat whole. Which it proceeded to do.

It simply slithered forward and swallowed the pig whose carcass showed as a bulge traveling to the reptile's stomach, there to be digested. The **pressure** of the snake's ribs crunched the pig's bones *noisily*.

All in all, it was a hideous spectacle.

Tom Franklin -- as much awed as the others -- spoke up in English.

"Now you know why they call this *Python Isle*," he said. "The place is crawling with them. They seldom attack humans, though, because they can't swallow them."

"Some comfort," Ham said sarcastically.

"Let us be on our way," Doc Savage suggested.

The group pressed on. Monk and Ham slipped back into their perpetual argument. This was as much from boredom as anything else. Both were frustrated by their inability to converse with the entrancing Queen Lha. Not to mention the problem of Tom Franklin's constant chaperoning.

They progressed up the rolling swells of land.

"I feel like I'm climbin' a snake," Monk muttered.

The white city loomed and above and ahead.

They had not yet reached the city when they were set upon.

Doc Savage -- who had expected some kind of welcoming committee (their aerial attire could hardly have transpired unnoticed) -- was not taken by surprise.

A squad of strangely-garbed men suddenly barred their path. They were archers, each dressed in a white kirtle of a garment cut off at the knees. With them was a squat individual who wore a **purple**-and-**gold** robe which fell to his brocaded sandals.

"Taxus!" Queen Lha gasped.

Taxus (he of the kingly robes) raised a brown arm and began to cackle words in ancient Hebrew.

Monk shoved to Doc's side. "What's that bozo sayin'?"

"Taxus is proclaiming Queen Lha to be an evil spirit returned from the Land of the Dead to unseat him," the **Bronze Man** translated. "The rest of us are allegedly her servants from the lower regions. He claims that we are all his prisoners."

"Nuts to that!" Monk scoffed. "Let's take 'em, Doc!"

He started forward.

Taxus -- seeing that -- pointed at the ungainly Monk. In response, an archer drew back and let fly an arrow.

What happened next was something that Monk Mayfair would remember to his dying day.

He saw the arrow released ...

... the next he knew, the **bronze** hand of Doc Savage appeared not 2 inches before his face accompanied by a loud slap!

Mon <blinked> ... focused ... then realized that the **Man of Bronze** had literally plucked the shaft in mid-flight! Its **copper** point had been arrested before it could split the homely chemist's scarred face.

Realizing how close to death he had come, Monk promptly sat down and gulped: "Whu-whu...whu..." in a sick voice.

Doc Savage dropped the arrow and presented his palms forward in a gesture of peace toward Taxus and his archers. At the same time, he told the others:

"More is to be gained by letting them take us into the city peacefully. We will surrender ourselves. But not our weapons, if possible."

He repeated himself in her language for the benefit of Queen Lha.

The others took his decision without complaint. Except for Tom Franklin who looked at Doc and muttered: "I can see that you're not all you were cracked up to be."

"Dry up!" Renny warned.

They were promptly surrounded by the strange archers -- but not manhandled -- and allowed themselves to be led toward the white city. The soldiers (they were plainly such) appeared respectful. No doubt due to Taxus' claim that Doc and his party were devils fresh from the local hades.

Taxus himself exhorted the group on from a distance farther removed than seemed necessary under the circumstances.

"That Taxus never did like to stick his neck out any," Tom Franklin observed in sullen English.

XIII -- The Invisible Wrath

The city was surrounded by 4 stone walls that were not much higher than the average man. Sawtoothed ornaments ridged the top. But there was no gate. Only a gap in one wall. The walls served only to keep out animals, Queen Lha remarked to Doc Savage.

It was not a very large city. But it was crowded. The prisoners saw many box-like structures of stone-and-wood which appeared to constitute private dwellings. There were scattered about like so many dice carelessly tossed. There were no roads, just ambling paths between buildings made by the constant tread of human feet.

Not far away, the large ornate limestone edifice they had seen from the air reared up. The **Bronze Man** recognized it for what it was. The **royal palace**.

"Too bad Johnny had to miss out on this," Monk remarked.

'Johnny' Was William Harper Littlejohn, the archaeologist member of Doc Savage's tiny band. He always had fits when he missed out on adventure involving his area of expertise.

The human knot that was Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Renny Renwick, Queen Lha, and Tom Franklin (Habeas Corpus had disappeared again, causing Monk much worriment) was led by Taxus' archers through a cleared space. On either side were outdoor stalls protected by bamboo awnings. It was an outdoor market, not greatly different from like affairs which can still be found throughout the Orient, unchanged from ancient times.

Still keeping a prudent distance from the prisoners, Taxus had advanced gesticulating and calling loudly to all passerbys that they encountered. A growing train of men, women, and children followed curiously in their wake. Most of them were attired in long sheet-like wrappings similar to those worn in illustrations of Bible scenes.

Unable to catch all of Taxus' harangue (the sorcerer's words tumbled out very rapidly), Doc Savage asked Queen Lha to translate.

"Taxus is calling the people together to decide our fates," the girl said in her own tongue. "He continues to denounce us as evil demons."

Doc rendered that into English for the benefit of Monk, Ham, and Renny. The latter were not exactly warmed by the news.

"I don't like the way this is shapin' up," Renny growled, his massive **fists** blocked tightly.

Monk and Ham were busily scouring the city with their eyes.

"Jove!" Ham said. "No sign of that Blackbird chap. I wonder if he even found this island."

"I'm more interested in knowin' if Bull Pizano is skulkin' around somewhere," Monk muttered, scratching a gristle tuft of an ear absently.

Ham made a scoffing noise through his nose. But he clutched his sword-cane more tightly thereafter. There was no sign of anyone who was not an inhabitant of the city. Renny looked at the pair wonderingly.

The procession came to a halt in front of the massive palace structure. It was by far the most impressive structure on the island.

It was a long rectangular block of limestone with 2 smaller wings on either side. Wide steps led up to a huge entrance. This was bereft of portals but was easily 10 feet across and 15 feet high. The entire structure rose over 40 feet. Its walls were notched with tiny windows.

The enormous entrance was supported by a pair of **copper** pillars around which wound (on each) a giant serpents. The latter looked to have been done in **gold** leaf.

"Ugh!" Ham said. "This whole place is snake-happy."

"This isn't getting any more cheerful," Renny agreed gloomily.

In front of the palace was a circular pit all of 300 feet around a 3 yards deep. It was as if a giant pot had been depressed into loose soil ... lifted out ... and flagstones then laid around the rim of the resultant pit.

The archers stepped back into the gathering crowd, leaving them near the pit's edge. The crowd had surrounded the pit.

Purple-robed, squat Taxus ascended the palace stairs until he stood between the serpentine pillars. The sorcerer launched into another energetic exhortation, frequently pointing at the prisoners.

"Doc?" Monk asked, small-voiced.

His brow slightly knit with the effort of following the sorcerer's harangue, the **big man of metal** simply said: "More of the same."

They were close enough now that they could see the villainous Taxus clearly. He was squat and wide as they had already observed. But his formidable appearance was diminished at close range.

His **gold**-fringed **purple** robe fell to his sandal-shod ankles but left his arms bare. His arms were thick, but soft like those of a plump woman. His hands were likewise pudgy. Most of the fingers were adorned with jeweled rings which *clicked* when he gestured.

His face was wide, dark, and made comical by a weird-looking beard. It jutted out from his chin in a fashion not unlike the beards worn by the Pharaohs of old Egypt. This one looked as if someone had clipped the bristles from a paintbrush, curled them, and affixed that to the point of the sorcerer's chin. The hirsute ornament waggled out-of-time with his jaw action when Taxus spoke.

Taxus' eyes were anything but humorous. They were the flat black of tar after it has cooled and close-set. Doc Savage and his men read viciousness in those eyes and in the predatory cast of his hooked-nosed countenance.

The entire effect was that of the mean head of an evil hawk surmounting the well-fed plump body of a sparrow.

Taxus' tirade changed suddenly. Even Monk, Ham, and Renny (who did not understand ancient Hebrew) realized this instantly.

His shouting lifted to shrill *screeching*, making the sorcerer even more remindful of an evil bird. Maledictions poured forth from his lips.

"Taxus has stated his case, he is saying," Doc translated in response to Monk's question. "Now he is asking the populace to judge whether we should receive the Trial of the Python Pit."

The **Bronze Man** turned questioningly to Tom Franklin.

"What is that?"

"Practically a sentence of death," Franklin said grimly. "We will be thrown into this pit here and made to fight a bunch of the biggest pythons they can capture. I've seen it happen before. We won't be given weapons. But we'll be expected to fight it out to the death like that gladiators of Rome. It's pretty grisly."

"Anyone ever come out on top that you know of?" Monk wondered.

"Not that I know of," the redheaded aviator told the homely chemist.

"Quiet," Doc warned suddenly.

Queen Lha -- who had been listening tensely to all that Taxus had said -- now proceeded to make her own case to the crowd. Her style was substantially different from that of the hawk-faced sorcerer. She did not yell or scream but -- rather -- implored, entreated, and reasoned.

The crowd hung on her every word attentively. Doc Savage and his aides realized why this beautiful creature was the queen of these people. She was a truly capable young woman.

The crowd (it had at no time been unruly enough to be called a mob) then began to talk back to the **purple**-robed Taxus. The latter -- the picture of a biblical orator -- responded in kind.

"They are quarrelling over the merits of Taxus' accusations against us," Doc told the others.

"Bet you wish you could put your 2 cents in, shyster," Monk told Ham unkindly.

"Shut up!" Ham snapped.

The well-dressed lawyer prided himself on his powers of persuasion. He had been listening to the exchange intently despite his inability to understand any of it.

He turned to Doc Savage.

"What is happening?" he asked sharply.

"The populace appears to be siding with Taxus,' the **Bronze Man** said slowly. "The fact that Queen Lha was last seen flying from here in Franklin's plane is damaging. This has convinced many that Lha is in league with evil spirits. We are to receive the 'Trial by Python' which Franklin spoke of.

"Holy cow!" Renny gulped. "But then, what are they fussin' about?"

"The exchange appears to be a formality. A test of the soundness of Taxus' argument," Doc explained dryly. "At the moment, Taxus is point out Monk as an obvious example of an underworld demon."

Ham broke up laughing.

"I've always claimed that!" he chortled.

Still worried about his missing pig, Monk glared at the dapper lawyer and clipped his lips together. He *buzzed* like an annoyed bumblebee. *Monk Mayfair had to be very mad to buzz.*

Ham quieted hastily.

Renny broke in. "I say we tie into these birds right now."

He reached for his supermachine pistol. But Doc Savage grabbed his arm.

"Wait!" he barked.

The reason for his admonition became at once apparent.

At the **Bronze Man's** side, Queen Lha stiffened and gasped. Her sloe-like eyes were riveted on the crowd and obviously on someone in particular.

Doc Savage uncanny *flake-gold eyes* searched out the crowd in the approximate direction of Lha's stricken gaze. He quickly spotted the old woman.

She was dressed not differently from others in the crowd. She was an ancient crone. But otherwise not noteworthy in any aspect of her appearance.

But her behavior was decidedly unusual.

The crone was seated in the dirt of the plaza studiously chewing on something held in one with red hand. Her eyes were peculiar. Vacant, almost unseeing. She kept them on the clear sky above, appearing to take scant notice of the proceedings.

At times, she stopped her mastications and made wild, aimless gestures with her hands. Her thin mouth worked. But Doc -- reading her lips -- knew that she was only murmuring nonsense in her own language.

Doc Savage addressed the distraught Lha.

"That is the old woman who raised you?" he asked quietly. "The one upon whom Taxus cast the spell of his **Invisible Wrath**?"

It was less a question than a statement of fact on the **Bronze Man**'s part.

Queen Lha nodded, her dark eyes brimming with moisture.

"Yes. That is Hagai."

Doc turned to the others.

"Remain here," he directed. "I will see what I can do about changing our fortunes."

Moving quietly and steadily so as not to "spook" the watching archers , the *bronze giant* -- -- strode to the seated old woman.

The crowd -- conscious of Doc's reputation as a devil -- gave back, leaving Hagai in an open space.

Doc Savage knelt beside the crone Hagai who seemed to be oblivious to his presence. Her mutterings continued unabated.

Gently, Doc's hard *bronze* fingers lifted her eyelids and examined her pupils. These were dilated like those of a dope addict.

Next, he plucked an object from Hagai's unresisting fingers. It proved to be a simple ground root upon which she had been gnawing.

The **Bronze Man** examined this ... recognized it (his knowledge of Botany was profound) ... and threw the tuber away.

From the palace steps, Taxus screamed orders!

He was ignored.

The *Man of Bronze* continued his examination checking pulse, respiration, and muscle reflex. He used no instruments. Only his sensitive fingers. His skills were many and deep. But by far, his greatest talents lay in the fields of Medicine and Surgery where he had experienced his earliest and most intensive training.

His examination completed, Doc produced a small hypodermic needle from a case carried in his vest. This contained a counteractant to the anesthetic gas he always used. He injected the old woman.

Moments passed ...

Then the woman ceased her incessant mumbling. Her orbs, however, remained glassy and fixed.

Doc produced a gold coin from a pocket and set it spinning on the tip of one finger. At the same time, he spoke to the old crone in a calm, soothing tone. His strange eyes were peaceful, lulling pools of *golden flakes*.

Hundreds of eyes were focused on him at that moment. His aides -- some distance away -- also watched fascinated.

Tom Franklin broke his moody silence.

"What's he doing, anyway?"

"Doc is hypnotizing that old woman," Renny vouchsafed. "He must know what's wrong with her."

Tom Franklin relayed this to Queen Lha. The latter raced to the **Bronze Man's** side to watch more closely.

Intent upon his work, Doc Savage paid her no heed. The coin whirled and his resonant voice gave forth words in ancient Hebrew. He was a master hypnotist, having learned the art from its true experts -- the Yogi holy men of India.

As Queen Lha watched, the old woman's eyes slowly lost their dull listless quality.

Doc <snapped? his fingers. Hagai started, seemed to snap entirely out of whatever weird spell held her in its grip.

Sobbing uncontrollably, Queen Lha embraced Hagai who responded with a flood of words.

Doc Savage withdrew to the side of his assistants.

"The old woman," he said, "had been hypnotized in some fashion and given a root which contains a natural narcotic to chew on. The combination of the narcotic and the spell kept her in a more-or-less drugged state -- the so-called 'Invisible Wrath'. It was a comparatively simple matter to counteract the narcotic and break the hypnotic spell. But let us hope that these people think it is more than that."

Whatever the reaction of the populace might have been was never learned.

Because at that moment, hawk-faced Taxus -- enraged at the **Bronze Man's** conquest of his **Invisible Wrath** malady -- screamed forth a stream of imprecations mixed with orders.

The archers snapped to attention with their bows directed at Doc Savage, his men, and even Queen Lha.

Monk and Renny -- the 2 scrappiest of Doc's aides -- went for their supermachine pistols instantly.

"Monk! Renny!" Doc Savage rapped, his voice harsh. "Our bulletproof vests might protect us. But Franklin and Lha are not immune to arrows."

*All of Doc's men wore chain-mail undergarments of the **Bronze Man's** devising.*

Monk and Renny let their hands drop sheepishly. Ham gripped his sword-cane. Tom Franklin made mallets of hands.

Several archers -- unarmed -- approached. One swept Queen Lha roughly into the palace. She struggle a little, but not much.

Hagai promptly melted into the sea of humanity ringing the pit.

"Doc!" Monk whispered. "What are we gonna do?"

"Nothing as yet. We are effectively boxed. Taxus has ordered us deprived of our weapons now that the people seem to be on his side. Do not resist. We may yet see our way out of this predicament."

The archers executed an almost-perfect modern frisking of Doc Savage and the others. Their machine-pistols were collected along with the contents of their pockets and Doc's equipment vest.

Dapper Ham Brooks groaned shamelessly when his sword-cane was confiscated.

Monk and Renny looked pained. They plainly wanted to fight. But nonetheless respected their **bronze** Leader's wishes.

At the spear points of guards fresh from the palace, the captives were marched past the empty python pit and into the royal building itself.

They had a momentary glimpse of a tapestry-hung throne room before they were taken down one wing of the palace. There, under Taxus' order, Tom Franklin was separated from the others. Wary, Taxus his distance.

They were led through a stone passage into what appeared to be a storage room. It was a dry airless space dimly lighted by huge jars filled with olive oil. Cloth wicks were stoppered in the necks of the vessels. Shadows puddle everywhere.

His face unhappy in the murk, Renny Renwick rumbled: "I wonder what the local bastille is like."

They quickly found out.

One of the spear-carrying guards stooped and lifted a heavy wooden trapdoor. He signaled for the prisoners to climb down into the hold.

Doc Savage stepped to the edge ... found only a cistern-like pit ... and addressed his men.

"It is empty. No snakes. We will do as they direct. They want us alive for the python pit."

He then dropped into the well, landing easily on his feet with his springy legs absorbing the impact.

Monk Mayfair followed suit, looking absurdly like a jungle gorilla jumping from a tree.

Then Ham Brooks.

Renny Renwick came last, his big frame landing awkwardly. He upset and boomed: "Holy cow!"

The trapdoor (it was about 15 feet above their heads) slammed shut. It was gloomy in the well-like pit. But not altogether dark. The trapdoor was carved into a grill and some pale light spilled down.

That wasn't all that spilled down, they soon discovered.

There was a small aperture at one end of the ceiling several feet from the trapdoor. It too was covered by a wooden grille, this one exceedingly fine. Tiny particles began to fall from this second grille.

Monk happened to be under this precipitation and had twice brushed at his **rusty** nubbin of a head muttering about "bugs" before he realized it was not insects that were annoying him.

"For the love of mud!" he exploded. "It's rainin' in this doggone calaboose! Hey, what is stuff anyway?"

He applied the tip of his tongue to a handful of particles. He spat violently and proclaimed:

"Sand! Ordinary beach sand!"

Monk sounded -- for some reason -- astonished by the discovery.

"This doesn't make any sense," Ham fretted loudly. "Why would they pour sand down on our heads?"

The answer became apparent not long after.

The sand whispered down slowly but steadily. It formed a small mound on the cistern floor which grew, shifted, and spread.

It was extremely fine stuff. Consequently, the air became filled with a salty dust. It crept into their mouths which they quickly discovered were better kept shut. It worked into their nostrils. Renny sneezed. The noise was like a goose honking!

"The air is getting..." Ham started to say.

But his words got lost in the coughing fit which seized him when he took in some of the dust through his wide orator's mouth.

"Serves you right for opening your mouth, ambulance chaser!" Monk sneered.

His words came out very fast and had a nasal quality because he was holding his nose shut.

Doc Savage tore his shirt into long strips and wordlessly passed one to each of his men. He placed one of the strips over his mouth and nose. It made breathing less painful. Monk, Ham, and Renny did likewise.

Doc spoke through the improvised filter.

"This business with the sand is obviously to keep us off balance during our incarceration. Breathing will be difficult. And sleep next to impossible."

"That means bustin' outta this joint anytime soon is gonna be some feat," Monk growled.

"They must have some kind of contraption up there -- like a bin and coal-chute arrangement -- for feeding the sand through that grille," hazarded Renny who had an eye for anything that smacked of the engineering trade.

"Wait a minute!" Ham put in. "This island doesn't have a beach. Where is the sand coming from?"

"Probably it is dredged up from the ocean and stored here for use in construction," Doc Savage guessed. "But that is not important now. Observe how rapidly this cistern is filling. We will have to constantly smooth down the sand to stay on top of it or we will most certainly be buried by morning."

The sand had now spread to most of the pit floor. They fell to flattening it out. But the work was tedious, owing to the fact that they needed to keep one hand free to hold their face protectors in place.

Several unpleasant hours passed in this fashion.

By that time, the dust had gotten all over their skin, hair, and clothing. Even Doc Savage resembled a powdered ghost.

The stuff continued to hiss down. They were now sitting on almost 6 inches of sand. To stand was to sink into the fine granules. The trapdoor above remained hopelessly out of reach.

"I wonder how Queen Lha is doing?" Ham asked suddenly of no one in particular.

"And that Franklin," Monk inserted. "He sure started actin' strange once everybody got uncaptured. Almost as if he didn't want us to come to this place. I don't trust him."

"You're just jealous because he monopolized the girl," Renny snorted.

"Oh yeah, Big Fists!" Monk argued. "Then you explain ..."

He shut up abruptly.

Above, someone began to fiddle with the aperture that fed the sand into the pit. It loosened.

"Wonder who that could be," Renny asked uneasily.

The grille came free and disappeared. A Niagara of choking sand gushed down like salt from a shaker after the cap is removed.

Ham -- who was nearest -- was buried waist-deep in the sudden deluge. Monk pulled him free (not gently!) by the hair.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed. "What's going on? I thought they wanted us alive!"

It was evident to all that at the rate the grains were coming down, they would all be buried or suffocated in a very short time.

A face then appeared at the trapdoor grille, indistinct because it intercepted the light coming from behind it.

"Savage!" a voice jeered. "You should thank me for this. It's quicker than the snakes. But you'll be just as dead when it's over with."

The head vanished from the grille.

They couldn't make out the marauder's features. But his voice was unmistakable.

"Blackbird Hinton!" Monk croaked. "He's on this island!"

XIV -- Death and Taxus

After being separated from Doc Savage and his men, Tom Franklin was taken to a chamber, bound, and left to his own thoughts.

The chamber was a model of sumptuous barbarity. Deep **purple** rugs covered the tiled floor. The walls were hung with tapestries, many of them decorated with python motifs. Oil0jar lamps served to both illuminate and heat the room. A draft came in through a doorway which boasted no door, only a heavy curtain for privacy.

Franklin had been unceremoniously thrown onto a couch. But he knew that he had been accorded better treatment than Doc Savage's group. This was because he had occupied a position of some rank as a confidant of Queen Lha during the days before Taxus had stolen the throne.

Tom Franklin had no doubt that at least one guard stood outside his chamber. But that not deter him from working on his bonds which were tough and woven from some type of jungle vine until it had near the strength of steel cable. The **red-haired** aviator came to realize this after spending a fruitless hour struggling against the hardy strands.

He was covered with sweat by the time he gave up that tack. He stood up. His feet had not been bound. There seemed to be no reason to immobilize him completely while a guard was posted.

Franklin walked over to one of the big oil jars. He turned so that his hands (which were tied behind his back) hung above the burning wick.

He set his teeth and bent his knees. **Flame** seared a thumb and he shot a foot into the air! He did not yell. But his lips leaked crimson strings where he had bitten them.

He tried again. This time, he **scorched** the edge of a palm. He did not react. Instead, he used the pain as a guide and got his wrists over the flame. This proved to be the most agonizing part.

Franklin felt his wrists burn. He even smelled the stink of charring flesh but could not tell if his bonds had caught or if he were needlessly injuring himself. Tears streamed down his tanned features. He groaned inwardly but nonetheless held his ground.

The bonds parted finally, shedding sparks. Tom Franklin held up his wrists. They were lobster-red and blisters were already forming. The damage did not appear to be serious.

But the **pain** was, however. The battered flyer slapped down onto the couch and let the waves of anguish course through his nervous system before he attempted any further movement. Sobs racked his lank frame.

The fit subsided. Tom Franklin found his feet and crept to the curtain hanging over the doorway. He set an ear to the heavy fabric and caught the soft treading of a lone guard. The latter seemed to have a sinus condition. His breathing was a noise whistling.

At times, the redheaded scrapper heard a bump, scrape! of a sound, indicating that the guard bore a long spear. Its shaft dragged when the guard walked and thudded when he rested it.

Franklin kept a close eye on the moving shadow that the light threw onto the curtain. He sucked on his burned wrists while he waited.

When the guard passed directly before the curtain, Franklin pounced!

The guard had a momentary impression of a soft heavy animal descending upon him. He struck out instinctively with his spear. But the sharpened **copper** point ripped through the heavy cloth and got tangled up.

Hard bone-like appendages lurked under the soft material and struck rapidfire! The guard went down unconscious before he realized that it was his prisoner -- Tom Franklin -- who had jumped him, bearing the door hanging along.

Franklin scrambled up frantically. There was no other guard, he was relieved to find. The passage was the one he recognized. He went to the nearest curtain which denoted a chamber beyond.

Within, he found Queen Lha. She was not bound. But nevertheless subdued in spirit to show that Taxus thought it unnecessary to further restrain the beautiful erstwhile ruler.

She came out of her depression and raced to the **redhead's** side. They exchanged low words in ancient Hebrew.

"We'll have to make a break for it while it's still dark," Franklin breathed.

He took her by the arm and hurried along the murky passage. After several twisting turns, it led past the darkened throne room and onto the wide low steps of the palace.

There were 2 guards in evidence. Franklin motioned to the black-haired Lha to remain in the shadows. He padded forward -- a long angular shadow in what was now evening.

The first guard went down under a clubbed fist. Franklin caught his long spear before it clattered to the stone steps.

The other guard turned, suddenly acquiring a long axis through his midsection. He fell backward, the head of the spear which impaled him catching against a step. His body slid slowly down the length of the shaft, turning it **crimson** in the moonlight. *He never made a sound.*

Tom Franklin waved Lha ahead.

She halted abruptly, her sloe eyes wide.

"What about Doc Savage and his men?" she questioned excitedly. "We should try to set them free."

Franklin pulled her along roughly.

"Lot of good they did us. They can all rot in Taxus' pits for all I care!"

"But," Queen Lha protested, "They are our only hope!"

"Not if we can get to Savage's bird," Franklin said grimly. "Listen to me, Lha. I have a plane. If we can carry enough **gold** from the treasure house to the plane, we can escape and hire someone who can really defeat Taxus. It's the only way."

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A voice -- harsh and gritting -- jumped out of the sepia night at them.

"Well well. I think we've lucked onto something interesting, mates."

It was the voice of **Blackbird Hinton**.

Tom Franklin and Queen Lha skidded to a stop.

Several ominous figures bared their way. Foremost among them was the raven-**black** form of Blackbird Hinton, the hard-bitten skipper of the tramp *Mighty*. He had his ebony pistol pointed squarely at Tom Franklin's belt buckle.

Behind him loomed hulking Bull Pizano with a baseball bat in one beefy paw. Dandified King Hancock -- unarmed -- lurked nearby, his sharp eyes watchful.

Blackbird laughed nastily.

"Didn't think we were on this snake-haunted rock did you, bucko?"

Tom Franklin made painful fists and said a grim nothing.

"Da joke's on youse," Bull Pizano sneered. "We wuz here all along. Beat dat **bronze** guy's time and hid out plane where it couldn't be seen."

"That's right," Blackbird cut in. "We made a deal with that egg you told us about -- Taxus. Lucky thing he learned some English from you all that time you were stuck on this island, huh? Lucky for us, that is. Anyway, when Savage led you in like lambs to slaughter, we decided to lie low for a while."

King Hancock moved closer. He cast a long lingering look in Queen Lha's direction he spoke.

"Cap'n, I don't see any sign of Savage or the others. Looks like they escaped on their hook."

Blackbird cawed like a satisfied crow.

"Good! That means the sand must have got them by now!"

Then he said to Franklin: "I was about to tell you that we don't get our cut of the **gold** until the rest of you are croaked. So we've been sort of keeping a weather eye on Taxus in case he takes a notion to pull a double-cross. I figgered that **bronze** devil was too dangerous to be left alive till tomorrow. So I just arranged for him and his boys to get the bump tonight."

Blackbird paused, his gun still raised. His left hand ran slowly down the front of his coat like a crow preening one wing. His **black** eyes acquired a shine.

"Boys, I don't see any reason we should wait for morning," the Mighty skipper said slowly. "We can get the **gold** now. This **brick**-topped lad knows where it's hidden. He'll talk. He's done it before."

Bull Pizano's mashed face grinned unpleasantly.

Tom Franklin tensed and looked ready to do something rash.

But Pizano stepped forward and clamped his arm with an oversized hand.

Sweat popped out of Franklin's forehead. His lips peeled back from clenched teeth. He made a low noise in his throat. It was the kind of a sound that a rabbit makes when it finds its foot caught in a trap.

Rom Franklin kicked out, barked one of the huge thug's shins.

Pizano snarled! The **redhead** folded after the bat connected with his temple.

Queen Lha let out a choked gasp, swayed.

"Get rid of her!" Blackbird ordered Bull Pizano. "Take her up in the plane and drop her over water somewhere. We don't need her anymore."

"Cap'n, wait!" King Hancock said excitedly. "Do you think that's smart?"

His face looked shocked. His complexion was the hue of moist dough.

Blackbird glowered briskly at his First Mate.

"What do you mean?"

Hancock swallowed nervously.

"Well, she might be useful ..." he began weakly.

His eyes were on the dark-haired beauty who struggled a little in Pizano's brutal grip. She avoided his gaze.

"She's unnecessary!" Blackbird said savagely. "Get rid of her, Bull!"

Big Bull Pizano started to haul Lha away ...

King Hancock made a grab for Blackbird's pistol. He snared it.

"Hot it! Both of you!" he warned.

He waved the weapon back-and-forth between Blackbird Hinton and an open-mouthed Bull Pizano.

"Hey! What is this?" Bull rumbled.

"Hancock! You gone nuts?" crow-like Blackbird demanded. "Give me that gun!"

"Stand back! I mean it!"

Bull Pizano gave Queen Lha's white arm a sudden twist. She *squealed* in pain. Hancock whirled frantically.

That was enough for the canny Blackbird. The **black**-garbed Skipper waded in and rained blows on his First Mate.

Hancock -- no fighter -- went down. Blackbird retrieved his gun.

"What's got into dat bird?" Bull Pizano wondered.

"Beats me. He's been acting balmy around that girl ever since this thing started. All the more reason to get her out of our hair."

Bull Pizano threw the frightened Queen across a ham of a shoulder and bore her into the night.

Blackbird gave the still-conscious King Hancock a resounding kick in the ribs.

"Get up!" he snarled. "I'm going to need you. Help me drag **Red** here back into the palace. We need to palaver with that geek Taxus."

Hancock struggled shamefacedly to his feet. His Prince Albert coat could no longer be described as "natty".

They found squat, hawk-faced Taxus in his throne room eating a meal of what looked suspiciously like snake meat.

Taxus stood up at their entrance. They had left Franklin outside the room. The sorcerer's evil eyes gleamed suspiciously.

"What is this?" he demanded in halting English. "You agreed to remain in hiding."

"Good thing for you we didn't," Blackbird gritted, preening his imaginary feathers. "We caught that flier Franklin with the girl outside. They got loose somehow."

"*What?*" sputtered Taxus, his curled-paintbrush beard wobbling on the end of his chin.

"Don't worry. We got them both. Franklin's outside out cold. But I had one of my boys take the girl up in our flying bird and dump her into the ocean. I figger we can her disappearance on Doc Savage."

Taxus stroked his beard like a boy patting a cat's tail. His finger rings clicked together like teeth in an animated skull.

"Good. The people ... My people -- do not believe my tale that she is a devil come back from the Dead. I will tell them the Wizard Barbarian caused her to vanish. That will convince them. Tomorrow, the *Man of dark metal* and his friends will die the excruciating death of the python pit."

"And we split King Solomon's gold," Blackbird added slyly. He made no mention of that fact thank thanks to him, Doc Savage and his men were doubtless already suffocated under tons of crushing sand.

"Yes," purple-robed Taxus agreed slowly. "We will share the riches of Ophir."

XV -- Shark Swim

When Doc Savage -- imprisoned in the sand pit -- realized that the insidious grains were gushing down at a rate which threatened to bury them in a matter of minutes, he reacted as if galvanized.

"Against the far wall!" he urged. "The sand will build up most heavily under the grille. This should buy us a little time."

"Not much it won't!" Ham wailed through his improvised mask.

They set their backs to the cold stone wall. The sand had already risen to their knees.

Monk -- being built somewhat differently than the others -- had to hoist his long arms to keep his hands out of the sand. He gaped at the dusty torrent, his eyes bugging from his head like skinned grapes.

"There's a guard up there!" he howled as if the presence of a guard meant anything positive.

"Lot of good he's going to do us," Renny thumped. "Blackbird probably bribed him to keep hands off."

His dour face was almost hidden behind a clamped hand.

Doc Savage swept his strange g e up to the wooden grille through which the guard was peering down and where -- not moments before -- the wicked visage of Blackbird Hinton had shown itself. The corked diamond smuggler had obviously taken his departure, leaving the Solomon guard to watch the slow extinguishing of the lives of the **Bronze Man** and his 3 assistants.

"A little while ago," Monk muttered, "I was sayin' as how old Johnny shoulda been here. Now I'm glad he's not. It looks like we're sunk, brothers."

"Perhaps not," Doc Savage said quietly.

The **bronze giant** pulled one legs free of the imprisoning sand and set his foot down on the current level. The foot sank a bit due to the extreme fineness of the granules. But not as much as before. He repeated the act with his other leg.

"Holy cow!" Renny coughed. "What's Doc doing?"

*The **Bronze Man** said nothing.*

Steadying himself against the wall with a hand, he reached down to his left shoe. It was not fastened in the way of most shoes (i.e., with laces) but with a zipper. He unzipped the shoe, removed it and his sock.

His aides watched eagerly. But the swirling clouds of sand dust obscured what next occurred.

They discerned their leader do something to the sole of his **bronze** foot. (It was a remarkable foot. The toes were wonderfully long and possessed nearly the prehensile agility of fingers.)

Next, he moved to the middle of the floor, closer to the falling sand. He was beneath the trapdoor grille where the guard was attempting to peer through the shifting dust.

Doc called up to the guard in the latter's own language.

"I don't get this," Monk mumbled.

But his eyes never the left the *mighty figure* that was **Doc Savage**.

Doc's arm snapped up in the direction of the guard's face. Nothing seemed to happen.

Again, Doc flipped his arm up. To these men, the action appeared to make no sense. It looked for all the world as if the **Bronze Man** were flinging minute bits of sand back at the guard.

Then the guard let out a *howl!* He jumped up and his face was lost to view. For a full minute while the sand crept up toward their waists, they could hear the guard bawl and hop around as if stung by some venomous insect.

Doc Savage called up to him again in his own language. There came an answer. Frightened, questioning.

Doc replied in the ancient tongue.

Then the wooden grille lifted up. A rope of woven plant fiber snaked down.

"Jove!" Ham said, then fell into a hacking fit of coughing.

"You first, Monk," Doc Savage said, his penetrating *voice* only slightly muffled by the cloth protector.

Monk Mayfair scrambled up the thick rope with unusual agility using only his hands.

Ham went next. He grasped the rope -- keeping his mouth and eyes tightly shut against the shower of particles -- and walked up the wall using the rope for leverage.

Renny tried to ascend by his massive **hands** alone. But the rope was like a string in his freakish fists. He slipped back ... then successfully used Ham's method.

Doc Savage went up the rope last. Seeming only to lay his *corded* hands upon the rope, he floated out of the pit as if weightless.

The **Bronze Man** found his 3 aides looking like men who had been rolled in dirty flour and now brushing themselves off. Frightened, the guard stood a little ways off. He said something in a pleading voice.

Doc went to his side. The guard shrank back but metallic hands took him.

Doc applied **pressure** to nerves in his neck. The guard promptly sank gently to the floor. He snored.

Looking down at his ruined apparel, Ham made a disgusted face and questioned: "What happened, Doc? Why did that guard up and release us?"

The **Bronze Man** waved a hand for silence. He checked the passage ... then returned satisfied.

"I happened to have taped to the sole of my foot a number of tiny darts," he informed them. "The tips are coated with a harmless chemical which produces a temporary nausea when it is absorbed into the bloodstream. I managed to hit this fellow in the face with one and convinced him that he could be made well again only if he released us. He will awaken after the effects of the dart have passed."

Doc Savage -- with characteristic modesty -- did not mention that it had been quite a feat to send one of the tiny darts through the wooden grille and into its target under the circumstances. In fact, he had missed on the first throw.

The darts were merely another example of his foresightedness. That he had saved their lives was evident but not remarkable. It had often been thus.

Monk stamped his feet to shake loose clouds of dust from his apish form. He made fierce faces.

"Let's mop us this joint!" he suggested. "Feed us to the pythons will they! "I'll ..."

Doc cut him off.

"Our best bet might be to quit the palace and secure our plane against Blackbird and his crew. A circumspect departure is advisable."

"Shouldn't we attempt to free Lha and Franklin?" Ham asked hopefully.

"No time," Doc rapped. "Without the tri-motor, we could be marooned on this island indefinitely. We will have a better chance of taking effective action once we get to our equipment."

"I'm with you, Doc," Renny boomed. The **echoes** of his voice almost sired dust off their clothes.

The 4 men eased cautiously down the jar-lighted passage. They encountered no one until they had slipped out of the palace.

There they found 2 guards. One was unconscious. The other was impaled on the long shaft of a spear.

"Someone's sure been busy," Monk muttered.

"Blackbird Hinton, I'll wager," Ham guessed inaccurately.

"Quiet!" the **Bronze Man** undertoned. "I hear voices. Get to cover."

They slipped behind a small statue of a winged lion. It was one of two decorating the ground before the palace stairs. And practically the only item on the entirety of **Python Isle** that did not call to mind a serpent.

They peered into the darkness, eyes straining.

"Holy cow!" Renny ejaculated gleefully. "I think I see Bull Pizano!"

He blocked his bony **fists** eagerly. Monk and Ham swapped wary looks.

"Wait here," Doc Savage instructed them. "I will endeavor to eavesdrop on their conversation. Under no circumstances are you three to show yourselves."

Renny -- noticing the firmness in the **Bronze Man's** tone -- looked at Doc's departing form quizzically.

"I'll be blasted," he said wonderingly. "Even Doc is nervous around that overgrown ballplayer."

"Just wait," Monk piped up. "You've been luck so far. They got the drop on you when were glommed back in Cape Town and you didn't get to tangle with that big lummoX. You'd sing a different tune if you had."

Renny regarded the homely chemist disdainfully.

"You must be getting along in years," he ventured at last.

"Oh yeah?" Monk gritted. "How'd you like it if I kicked you around the python pit yonder for an hour-or-two?"

"Anytime you're feeling active," Renny returned.

"Shut up, you two!" snapped Ham. "Doc doesn't want us to give ourselves away.

The two subsided.

*Then Doc Savage returned. He materialized like a shaft of tropical moonlight taking on human form and the hue of polished **bronze**. He wore no shirt and his chest gleamed.*

"We have an immediate crisis," Doc announced in grim tones. "Blackbird has enlisted himself in Taxus' cause. Both Franklin and Lha have escaped and fallen into his hands. He intends to dispose of the girl by dropping her from their plane offshore."

"Blazes!" Monk squeaked. "We gotta stop 'em!"

"I will attend to that part," the **Man of Bronze** stated. "You three will continue on to our plane and keep it safe from Blackbird's men. It is our only hope of ever getting off this place."

"But Doc ..." Ham stated to object.

*But the **Bronze Man** had already vanished.*

Big Bull Pizano carried the kicking Queen Lha through the dark deserted city and out by the gate.

The guards -- seeing the black-haired ruler -- challenged them. But Pizano chased them off hastily.

Doc Savage trailed not far behind. It was child's play for him to vault the man-high wall and land lightly on the other side.

Bull Pizano struck out toward the north side of *Python Isle*. The way was long. But he made fair time through the palm and rubber trees. Although the isle was jungled, it was not overrun with foliage, vines, and creepers as se some jungles.

This caused Doc Savage no little disgust. Had the island been choked with vines and thickly-branched trees, he could have traveled from tree-to-tree monkey-fashion and made better time.

He had an accurate idea of Pizano's general destination and might have beaten him there, otherwise. As it was, he was forced to hang back to avoid being seen.

The **Bronze Man** had no trouble trailing Pizano down each rolling slope of Python Isle. The hulking Bull made considerable noise causing birds (mostly herons and dust-brown pigeons) to scatter before him and thus creating an unmistakable aerial trail.

Even when there were no birds, Doc found signs. He was an expert tracker. Crushed grass and broken foliage showed the way plainly. Curiously, the *bronze giant's* passing disturbed no roosting birds.

The only incident attending the journey occurred when Bull Pizano all-but-stepped on one of the big pythons that infested the isle. He reared back with an unearthly bellow and crushed the serpent's skull with a hard swing of his baseball bat.

The giant crook pressed on with Queen Lha tucked quiescently under a monstrous arm, her strength having failed early on.

Doc Savage -- more wary -- avoided the big snakes easily.

Their destination proved to be a small camp at the north side of the isle, close to where the rocky edge dropped almost sheer into the water.

Bull Pizano came up on the camp so suddenly that everyone reached for a weapon. These were hastily laid aside once they recognized the big hulking fellow.

"Hey!" Bull bellowed, dumping Queen Lha to the ground. "Where's dat pilot? Yeah, youse. Blackboid sez to take dis skoit and dump her in da drink. So hop to it! I gotta be getting' back."

He stopped only to check his animals. The cats and caged had been brought along as well.

Doc Savage watched from a place of concealment as Pizano crashed back into the jungle. The **Bronze Man** was some distance from the camp. There was little growth nearby. That portion of the island was higher than the other shores. So the mangrove tangle which thrives on saltwater had not flourished here.

There was no possible place where a plane might have been cached. Doc's *golden eyes* roved and saw nothing.

Then a faint *flicker* leaped into their *flake-gold* depths.

He glided toward the overhanging shore and disappeared past it.

The water was not deep, he found. It barely topped his thighs. He waded down a ways ... got around an outcropping of rock ... and found the grotto.

It was a sea cave worn into the stone flank of the island. There was evidence that the stone had been quarried at one time. Blackbird's seaplane was moored within by deadman anchors. Slanting moonlight showed it clearly.

Doc entered the cave and got down behind a big pontoon float.

The pilot arrived a moment later *sloshing* and cursing. He dragged Queen Lha behind him. She was obviously too exhausted to resist and had no inkling of what her fate was to be.

The pilot (he was a ratty, pock-faced worthy) lifted the girl onto the float and climbed aboard.

Cabled bronze fingers took him then. They vised his neck with inexorable force, choking off any outcry. He sank, insensate.

Doc spoke to Queen Lha in her native language. The conversation was short.

The result was that he escorted the girl out of the cave and onto dry land several hundred yards away from the Blackbird camp. Doc bore the unconscious pilot across one bare shoulder.

With low words of assurance, he left the girl and sleeping man. He returned to the seaplane, a *metallic phantom*.

The amphibian took off a moment later with Doc Savage in the control bucket. The craft taxied out onto open water, its exhaust stacks spilling smoke and thunder. Hammering radials put the seaplane on step and it vaulted into the air.

The men at the camp watched the ship take off sending horns of pale light ahead of it. They remained watchful even though it was too dark to possibly make out the sight of a body falling from the seaplane.

After a long moaning climb, the plane banked sharply ... then seemed to develop engine trouble. A motor sputtered. The craft got level and sank closer to the black water.

"Looks like he's tryin' to land," a man observed nervously.

The others fidgeted. They all knew that the plane was their ticket home.

The seaplane indeed appeared to be headed for a landing. It came in at a flat glide 2 miles out.

Then the engines quit. Its airspeed gone, the seaplane dropped like a stone onto the water. It fell a good distance. Enough that momentum overcame the natural buoyancy of the floats.

The craft sank hard ... bobbed once ... then sank again when water began to flood fuselage and engines.

It was lost to sight in under a minute.

"Cripes!" a man croaked. "Our plane!"

"We gotta get word to Blackbird fast," another put in tersely. "Our only way outta here now is Savage's bus!"

They broke camp and started the long trek inland.

Doc Savage was having trouble with the ocean currents. They were surprisingly strong. They were also not like ordinary currents. They ran parallel to the shore rather than in or out from it. The **Bronze Man** had not expected that.

Although he had stripped to silk trunk for greater freedom of movement and was swimming mightily, the current pushed him steadily eastward. His uncanny sense of direction told him that.

After he had deliberately wrecked Blackbird Hinton's seaplane, he had dropped from the craft before it sank completely and struck out for the approximate spot where he had left Queen Lha and the captured Blackbird pilot. His forward progress was hampered somewhat by the running current.

Then the shark appeared.

It was fortunate for Doc Savage that he chose to swim on the surface where it was light. Because had he traveled under the waves where it was as black as anthracite, he would probably not have seen the shark until it was upon him. But from above, its fin was distinct. And as reassuring as a drawn knife!

He stopped in the water, knowing that movement of any kind attracts sharks. But this one continued toward him. He could see the slate gray of its hull. There were long **brown** stripes visible three.

It was a tiger shark. A man-eater!

Doc waited, treading water. The shark undulated closer ... then suddenly vanished beneath the surface. He rolled forward and submerged himself.

Underwater, the great bulk of the man-eater could be discerned. It was all of 12 feet long. It flashed past the **Bronze Man** (his skin had the hue of cobalt now) without harming him.

Then it circled back lazily. Beneath its anvil-shaped snout were rows of hideous teeth razored together.

The shark made another pass. This time, Doc Savage drifted out a muscular arm and hooked one of the man-eater's pectoral fins which function like wings on a plane enabling the sea creature to glide through the brine.

He was pulled along. He made a grab for the knife-like back fin and levered onto the man-eater's powerful back. Holding both pectoral fins, the **Bronze Man** proceeded to ride the shark.

This activity had a distressing effect upon the shark, angering it. It shook, threshed, and beat its strong tail uselessly. Doc fought to hold on.

The shark's abrasive hide rasped his skin painfully. It would have been impossible for an ordinary man. But the **Bronze Man** stuck with it. He could hold his breath for prodigious lengths of time. It was a talent he had learned from the pearl divers of the South Seas.

His immediate interest, however, was staying out of reach of those ferocious teeth. This was the best method, he knew.

Riled, the shark broke the surface several times. This helped him. His breath-holding ability was remarkable but nonetheless not indefinite.

Unable to break the **Bronze Man's** grip and dragging his massive weight, the shark soon tired. It began to sink toward bottom, the planning effect of its fins inhibited.

Doc rolled clear of the shark. The man-eater wallowed as if in a daze.

He swept in (careful to avoid the fanged jaws) and landed a great *fist* against the one portion of the shark's anatomy which he knew to be the most vulnerable -- its blunt nose. This was where all its sensory organs reposed.

The man-eater rolled in the water, temporarily paralyzed by the *bronze giant's* expert punch. It hung like a dead thing belly-upwards with its ghastly grin exposed. He expected to be on shore by the time it recovered.

He continued his difficult swim against the strangely-running currents.

He encountered no more sharks.

XVI -- The Solomon Warriors

Monk and Ham were having an argument.

That was not unusual. The two spent most of their time harassing each other.

What was unusual was that for once, they were not in disagreement but were engaged in a heated exchange with the dour Renny Renwick. The argument concerned Bull Pizano.

"You're both nuts!" Renny was saying loudly.

His rumbling voice bounced along the cabin walls of Doc Savage's tri-motored plane where they were holed up.

"Bull Pizano is just a muscle-bound punk."

"Maybe so," Monk admitted. "But he's a darned tough muscle-bound punk. Especially when it comes to protectin' those animals of his. Right, shysters?"

Ham winced. But he went along with the burly chemist.

"Monk is right ... this once," Ham offered. "Bull Pizano is a holy terror. None of us are a match for him. Except Doc, of course."

Renny snorted loudly.

"He's overrated is all. I'd like to tie into him right now!"

He drove his eyes around the aircraft interior as if in search of a door to pile-drive his monster **fists** through. Finding none, he took a coconut that Monk had picked up in the jungle and cracked it open with one hand.

"He'd tie you into knots is more like it," Monk returned. Now that would be somethin'!"

"I find this whole affair something," Ham interposed. "It's hard to imagine this small island harboring descendants of the old-time Israelites all these years. Why, some of the people we saw may even be related to wise King Solomon himself!"

"Wasn't he the son of David -- the kid who slew the giant Goliath with a sling?" Monk asked in his surprisingly tiny voice.

"I know one giant I'd like to slay," Renny rumbled, returning to the subject of Bull Pizano.

"What I don't understand," inserted Ham who looked forlorn without his sword-cane, "is this island itself. How did it come to be shaped like a coiled snake? And what made it so perfectly round? It's impossible for an island -- or anything natural for that matter -- to be a perfect circle."

"I think I have the answer to that particular mystery," a quiet voice said.

It was Doc Savage.

He boarded the tri-motor with a soaked-and-bedraggled Queen Lha at his side.

"Holy cow, Doc!" Renny exploded. "You okay?"

Renny saw Doc's almost-nude body. The latter's silk trunks were still wet. But his *bronze* hair showed no trace of his recent immersion. His skin was broken in several places from his encounter with the shark. These spots *bled*.

"I had a slight difficulty," the **Bronze Man** offered.

He gave them a brief recounting of his destruction of the Blackbird seaplane and the rescue of regal Queen Lha.

He omitted his encounter with the killer shark. Or the fact that since there had been no time to question the captured pilot, he had left sleeping peacefully in a safe spot.

"Once Blackbird learns of his loss," Doc finished, "he will make rigorous attempts to seize this aircraft. We must prevent him from leaving once he has located the Ophir gold."

"We can stick around here and when they show up, hold them off with our super-firers," Monk suggested hopefully.

"No," Doc Savage countered. "We have other work to do if we hope to clear up this affair. We will drain the tri-motor's fuel tanks immediately so that the ship cannot be flown. Then we will set about others tasks."

They busied themselves at once. Using empty tins, they drained the odorous high-test petroleum; gathered together all spare cans of the stuff; and with their hands, dug a pit at the base of the dirt cliff which had nearly been their earlier undoing.

The soil was quite soft. They buried the fuel. As they worked, Doc Savage explained several things that he had learned about *Python Isle* during his recent adventure.

"This island," the **Bronze Man** explained, "is the focal point of numerous violent storms all year round. Inasmuch as the monsoon storms are caused by the infrequent change in wind currents, this can only be explained if the currents surrounding the isle are constantly in motion.

"I discovered this to be the case during my swim to shore. The tides here run in a circular fashion like a slow whirlpool. *Python Isle* appears to be in the center of a vortex of ocean currents constantly kept in motion by the changing monsoon. This is what produces the year-round violent storms."

"I get it!" Monk yelled. "That's why this rock is round like it is. The screwy tides wore away at it down through the ages until there was no beach left."

"True," Doc Savage said.

"But," Ham interjected, "I still don't understand one thing."

"Only one?" Monk interrupted unkindly, lapsing into his habitual quarrel with the dapper lawyer.

"Why does this place resemble a coiled serpent? It's just not natural."

"No," Doc admitted. "It is not. Queen Lha explained the history of this land to me. It seems that *Python Isle* -- when it was first landed upon by the colonists from Ophir -- was a hill and barely inhabitable owing to the numerous pythons. The early settlers -- once they realized that no boat could defeat the abnormal tides surrounding the isle -- subsisted on python meat.

"In time, they grew to worship that species of snake. That -- coupled with their need to cultivate eatable plants -- induced them to work the island's promontory into its current snake-like appearance. It is simply a kind of terracing of land, often used to open up greater areas of fertile soil for farming."

"That makes sense ... sort of," Renny muttered. "And they built that city on top later."

Doc Savage nodded in the darkness.

They had finished their task. No trace of disturbance showed in the soft soil.

"That settles that," Monk said finally. "Now what?"

Doc Savage -- a *Tower of Bronze* in the moonlight -- turned to his 3 men. Queen Lha had remained within the tri-motor, exhausted after her ordeal.

"Obviously," he began, "Blackbird is holding Tom Franklin somewhere in the city and intends to make reveal the location of the Ophir treasure. Blackbird's attempts to kill jus and Queen Lha indicate that he plans to double-cross Taxus. If Franklin talks, Blackbird will be nearer his goal.

"Our first task is to prevent that occurrence."

Renny popped his maul-like **fists** together exuberantly.

"Hot dog! Let's go! I'm itching to take a crack at that overrated Bull Pizano."

Doc Savage said: "Someone must remain in hiding to guard the girl. Renny will assume that duty once we located a place of concealment."

"But Doc ..." the huge engineer began to protest.

The Man *of Bronze* fixed him with a steady look. Renny fell silent. Doc's men seldom argued with their **bronze** chief.

Doc Savage paused only to work with Monk's compact chemical laboratory before they set off. He came away empty-handed, however. On the way, he explained his plan to Queen Lha.

The beautiful woman ruler of the lost island agreed instantly with the plan. In truth, she was eager to do his bidding. Her luminous eyes were upon his **Herculean** physique all during the trek.

"I think Lha has taken a shine to Doc," Ham confided to Monk as they worked their way toward the city.

"Don't they all?" Monk said disgustedly. "And he don't give them a tumble. Ever!"

It was true. There was no room in the **big Bronze Man**'s life for one of the feminine sex.

Doc studiously avoided such entanglements, reasoning that his many enemies might try to strike back at him through a loved one.

Pretty Queen Lha was another who would learn that Doc Savage was completely woman-proof.

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When they neared the city walls -- spectral in the Moon's wash of light -- they left Renny guarding Queen Lha in a stand of bamboo.

This vantage point enabled him to look down into the valley where their tri-motor stood. And from where -- should the necessity arise -- he could pick off anyone approaching the craft with his mercy pistol.

The group pressed on, Renny's loud mutterings of displeasure trailing them many rods.

The **Bronze Man** and his aides did not enter though the open gate. Or anywhere near it. Instead, they clambered over the stone wall at a convenient spot.

A bank of murky clouds swallowed the lunar orb with startling abruptness the moment they dropped onto the other side. Within, the city was in total **darkness**. *This helped somewhat.*

Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, and Ham Brooks cautiously threaded their way through the weird metropolis. It seemed deserted.

Monk and Ham held tiny rapid-firers in their hands. These were spares taken from the plane. Doc, of course, was not armed. He appeared, in fact, to be devoid of a single gadget, attired as he was only in his black swimming trunks.

"Where are we going?" Ham asked of Doc as they crouched in the lee of a stone residence.

"Queen Lha believes that Franklin is being held in a grain storehouse not far from the gate," Doc replied.

"She did not say how she knows this," he added.

They crept toward the gate. A solitary building with a wooden door loomed up ahead. It appeared deserted.

"This may be what we seek," Doc stated.

They advanced ...

The wooden door hung on stone pins not unlike hinges. It was barred from the outside by a stout rod of bamboo, hung on wooden prongs set into the structure for that purpose. Doc levered the pole up easily.

They entered. It was stepping into a tremendous box of **blackness**. As if some enterprising soul had captured the essence of night in a container.

"Monk," Doc said quietly. "Some light, please."

"Comin' right up."

Monk fished into a pocket and produced one of the spring-generator flashlights that the **Bronze Man** invented. He gave the generator a wind and spiked a thin beam of exceedingly white light around the interior of the intensely dark building. The light disclosed mounds of grain, nothing else.

The apish chemist twisted the lens. The beam that it emitted widened and sprayed luminance. Shadows shifted and jumped.

"Empty," Ham decided aloud.

He waved his machine-pistol about as if not trusting his own judgment.

"Queen Lha may have been mistaken," Doc Savage said. "We had best ..."

Shouts of discovery cut off the **Bronze Man's** next words.

Came the *slap* of running feet! A dozen-or-so of Taxus' warriors dressed in the garb of the time of Solomon rushed into view.

"**Back!**" Doc Savage great voice crashed.

Archers drew back on their bows. Spears were hefted back over shoulders ready to fly.

Monk whooped with joy and cut loose with his super-firer. The tiny weapon smoked, shuttled, and sprouted empty cartridges. White-clad warriors went down as if scythed. Others took their place.

"Get to cover, Monk!" Doc commanded.

He and Ham were scurrying behind the tall heaps of grain. Monk dropped back while Ham sent a moaning burst of mercy bullets past the homely chemist and into the charging soldiers.

Arrows flew and hit the sheltering grain piles with sounds like sand being kicked about. The shafts did not penetrate the thick mounds. Nor did the longer weightier spears. Although one -- striking the edge of a pile -- passed cleanly through and snipped a lock from Ham Brooks' handsome head.

The lawyer latched his weapon into sing-shot position and dropped the spear-thrower expertly.

"Ham has a good idea, Monk," Doc called over. "Try to conserve ammunition."

Monk fiddled with his super-machine pistol. Then he resumed shooting through the open door of the grain repository. The sound of the weapons died down to a spiteful *snapping* instead of the bull-fiddle **moan** they made while in continuous operation.

Arrows continued to rain. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of them. They thudded against stone and buried their lengths into the grain mounds.

"Blazes!" Monk squawled. "The whole dang city is turnin' out for this!"

He grinned in fierce anticipation.

So it seemed. The Solomon warriors crowded close to the door. They fell back before the sniping bursts directed at them by Monk and Ham.

"Be careful!" Doc Savage cautioned. "They are retreating. This may be only the prelude to a mass assault."

Monk and Ham set themselves ...

... then it came!

The attack was no less than a crashing wave of charging fighters. They yelled and ran in the fashion of soldiers down through the ages regardless of their armament.

Monk and Ham returned fire, their machine pistols now set to deliver continuous blasts. The weapons lipped *flame* and hosed mercy bullets. Men fell. But others came on over the bodies of the fallen. Doc's aides replaced exhausted ammo drums (which were not exactly plentiful).

Strangely, the shafts were no longer aimed at the spots where they crouched but at the summits of the grain mounds over their heads. Hard grain scattered. They symmetrical heaps began to fall apart at their tops and lose height.

"They are seeking to pick away at our cover," Doc warned.

He himself was working from mound-to-mound in an effort to gain the door unseen.

He encountered a figure in the dark. Doc Savage, for once, was caught unawares. His acute sense had not apprised him of another individual within the storehouse.

He made a grab for the intruder.

"Wait!" a voice hissed. "Savage! *It's me -- Franklin!*"

"Are you along?" the **Bronze Man** asked.

"Yeah," the flame-haired aviator responded. "I was being held here by Blackbird. But I got loose. I came back when I heard the racket, knowing it had to be you."

Franklin's voice now took on an edge.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"Never mind that now."

Doc directed his penetrating voice toward Monk and Ham. He used English. Which the Taxus minions could understand.

"Monk, Ham -- this way! There is another way out."

Firing as he came, Ham scuttled crab-like behind the line of grain piles until he reached the **Bronze Man's** side. Monk covered for him.

Then the apish chemist joined them. Monk ran doubled over, his furry knuckles almost touching the floor.

"What'd you find?" Monk wanted to know.

Then he noticed Tom Franklin.

"What's he doin' here all of a sudden?"

"Saving your worthless hide," Franklin retorted hotly. "But only If you get a move on."

A wall seemed to absorb him and he was gone.

Doc explored and discovered that a section of the wall swiveled on a pivot.

Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, and Ham Brooks hastily followed the long-lost pilot into the **darkness**.

*It was an abysmal darkness. It reminded Monk of **Death**.*

XVII -- Discontent

The three of them trailed the shadowy figure of Tom Franklin some distance. They were, they realized, in a narrow stone passage of some kind. The grain storage building had been situated against the city wall. The passage could only be a hollow segment of that enclosure.

A pencil of yellow light cracked wide ahead of them, framing Franklin's odd figure. He was still attired in one of the Ophir costumes.

"Through here," he called.

His voice had a hard brittle edge to it. When they emerged on the other side of a second pivoting door, they saw why.

"You have been tortured," Doc Savage said evenly, his *flake-gold* eyes on the **redheaded** flyer's hands.

The fingernails of both sets of digits had been forcibly pried from the quick. The fingers were puffy and encrusted with **crimson**. Some still leaked fluid. His wrists also showed burn blisters from his earlier ordeal.

"That damn Blackbird!" Franklin spat. "Lha and I managed to escape to escape. But they caught us. They... they made me tell them where King Solomon's **gold** is."

Franklin licked his cracked lips.

"Yeah?" Monk demanded. "Where is it?"

Franklin glared at the homely chemist.

"You go to Hell, ape!"

Monk took a step toward the other.

"I'll think I'll shake you loose from your bones," he growled. "You've been actin' mighty peculiar all through this shin-dig."

"Monk!" Doc Savage clipped.

Monk backed off, snarling.

The **Bronze Man** addressed the **red-haired** flyer who sank heavily into a lashed-bamboo chair. They were in one room of a residence. Furnishings were sparse and primitive.

"You have not very cooperative as Monk has pointed out," Doc told Franklin. "Why the change of heart?"

The tortured aviator looked up agonizingly. His gangling body appeared shrunken. Hollows were sunk under both eyes.

"That Blackbird is a devil in human form!" he grated. "Makes Taxus look like a piker. He tortured me. Twice! And now he has Lha."

"Had," Doc corrected. "We have the girl presently. Or to be precise, one of my men -- Renny Renwick -- has her. They are safe for the time being."

"Thank heaven!"

Tom Franklin sobbed and buried his face in his mutilated hands.

Ham whispered to the others.

"He likes the girl. Poor chap. He's been through a lot."

"I still don't trust him," Monk mumbled.

But most of the belligerence seemed to drain from the hairy chemist in the face of Tom Franklin's pitiful state.

"Tell us," Doc Savage prompted after Franklin's fit had passed, "what is happening in the city."

"That woman Hagai who you pulled out of Taxus' **Invisible Wrath** spell," Franklin began, "is going around telling her story. Queen Lha still has a lot of friends here and Taxus is not exactly popular. Except among the soldiers. Taxus has thrown in with Blackbird and everyone is getting suspicious. Something is brewing."

Doc Savage nodded slightly as if the news confirmed something he knew or expected. He considered.

"Blackbird Hinton and his crew want the Ophir **gold**. They have struck some sort of bargain with Taxus. But it is doubtful that either party intends to honor any agreement."

"I'd like to see Blackbird leave this island without a plane. Gold or nor gold," Ham said skeptically.

"Knowing Taxus," Franklin put in, "I wouldn't be surprised if the whole Blackbird gang ends up in the python pit tomorrow."

"We got our work cut out for us then," Monk growled.

The thoughtful light went out of the **Bronze Man's** eyes. He addressed Tom Franklin.

Can you lead us to the old woman Hagai?"

"Yeah," Franklin answered. "Follow me. Just keep low."

The quartet left the still residence and picked their way along the winding pathways. Behind them, they could hear the baffled *shouting* of the soldiers milling about the grain storehouse.

The Moon rode high in the sky like a dime against black velvet. It shed pale light. The stars were unnaturally bright.

Commenting on the twisting quality of the streets, Monk ventured: "I feel like I'm walkin' through a snake's insides."

They encountered no one.

Tom Franklin took them to a long structure (somewhat imposing) which was evidently the local version of a town hall. The *buzz* of human voices reached them from within.

They entered.

The meeting room was crowded with individuals. Both men and women. All were dressed in the biblical costumes which were the standard garb on *Python Isle*. The men wore kilt-like affairs and the women were swayed in long sheets of bright-colored goods.

All eyes turned at **Doc Savage's** entrance. And not a few jaws dropped. Still in his swim trunks, he might have been a pagan statue come to life. Monk, Ham, and Tom Franklin hung back, guarding the way out.

In ancient Hebrew, Doc asked if Hagai was present. His *voice* was deep, vibrant, commanding.

The old crone Hagai pushed forward. She pointed to the big *Man of Bronze* and exclaimed something in her lost tongue. A low murmur rippled through the crowd.

Ham nudged Tom Franklin with an elbow.

"What are they saying?"

"Hagai is telling everyone that Doc Savage was the one who cured her," Franklin explained. "She's asking them to rise up against Taxus and restore Lha to the throne. The people are listening to her. But they're scared."

Doc Savage advanced purposefully on the assemblage and threw both *tendon*-wrapped arms up in an attention-getting gesture. It was hardly necessary. There was not an eye in the room that was not already fixed on the *bronze giant*.

Employing the lost dialect of Hebrew, he began what was -- for him -- a long speech on the Evil that was brewing on the tiny isle. He spoke of the goodness of Queen Lha; of the treasure of Ophir; and of the wickedness of allowing the bold to fall into the hands of the invaders from the Outside World -- Blackbird Hinton and his crew.

Doc Savage denounced sorcerer Taxus as a despot, a traitor, and a faker whose power was as insubstantial as smoke. As proof, he pointed to his miraculous cure of the old woman Hagai and promptly offered to cure such victims of the so-called '**Invisible Wrath**' as could be brought before him.

The entire discourse was short, eloquent, and persuasive. It had a marked effect upon the crowd. The *Man of Bronze* had swayed them. The revelation that Taxus was in league with Blackbird helped change many timid minds.

Almost as one, the assembled proclaimed themselves to be friends of Queen Lha and were anxious to see swift justice done. It was an altogether satisfying spectacle.

Shouting angrily, the crowd boiled out of the building, forcing Doc and the others back into the night.

That was regrettable.

The ruckus was not inconsiderable and it attracted the attention of Taxus' warriors. They put in an appearance. Taxus -- somewhat resembling a fat, waddling **purple** grub -- was with them (or behind them, rather).

He screeched orders to break up the meeting. His soldiers (they were arms with long **copper**-tipped spears) waded in and began to prod the excited mob apart.

Monk unlimbered a mercy pistol. Ham did likewise. They checked their weapons. Each possessed an indicator telling remaining magazine capacity.

"I'm out of ammo!" Monk groaned. "And I've got no more drums!"

"Ham?" Doc asked.

The dapper lawyer shook his head ruefully.

"10 shots left. Not enough."

Then Blackbird Hinton -- with a bruised-looking King Hancock in tow -- hove into view.

He sighted Doc, Ham, Monk, and Franklin. He cursed wrathfully.

Then he conferred at length with the sorcerer Taxus.

Taxus shouted new orders. His spear-toting warriors -- having dispersed the mob -- moved in on Doc Savage and the others.

"We had best retreat," the **Bronze Man** decided suddenly.

And so they retreated. It was not difficult. The Solomon soldiers could not run very well, handicapped as they were by their long spears. These had a tendency to slip from grasps and drag in the dirt.

Taxus bawled more orders, waving his plump arms. His hawk-like face worded convulsively.

The wall surrounding the city was near. The *bronze giant* and his men went over this.

Doc gathered Tom Franklin (whose mutilated hands prevented climbing) into his **mighty** arms and - from a running start -- leaped to the top of the wall to drop lightly on the other side.

"I listened to tales about you over the radio all the time I was marooned here before," Franklin panted after he was set down and they began to run. "But I thought it was mostly hokum. I can see not it wasn't."

*There was frank admiration for the **Bronze Man** in the **redhead**'s voice. It was a distinct change from the surly manner he had evidenced hitherto.*

Ham Brooks trotted up alongside Doc.

"There's something fishy about this," he puffed. "Blackbird had every opportunity to shoot us down. But he let us escape. Why is that?"

"Because," Doc replied, "Taxus ordered that we be taken alive so that the python-pit trial can take place in the morning."

I guess Taxus doesn't yet know that Blackbird tried to kill us in the sand well," Ham mused.

The **Bronze Man** nodded.

"Treachery may be in the offing."

"Say!" Monk ejaculated. "I just remembered that Blackbird didn't exactly act shook up when he spotted us. He was mad, but he didn't seem surprised. Do you suppose he doesn't know that his plane is wrecked?"

Ham looked sideways at Doc who was pacing the others and not out-of-breath at all.

"What about that, Doc?" he questioned.

"It is imperative that we join Renny and Queen Lha immediately. Something is in the wind all right."

They reached the bamboo grove where they had left big-fisted Renny Renwick and regal sloe-eyed Queen Lha.

Neither was in evidence. And their plane below seemed deserted.

"Blazes!" Monk squeaked.

Doc Savage crouched down. The jungle grass was crushed in many places. Clods of loam had been kicked up. There were footprints in the grass and verdant moss which only the **Bronze Man** could read.

Using his remarkable **golden eyes**, he roved the area where they had left the pair. The others watched.

"What's he doing?" Franklin asked querulously. "There's not enough loose soil to read footprints!"

Doc Savage rejoined them presently.

"There are 3 sets of tracks," he stated firmly. "Two are those of Renny and Lha. The third obviously belongs to Bull Pizano. There are some signs of struggle and only one set of prints leading away -- Pizano's. Their dept indicates he was carrying approximately the equivalent weight of both Renny and the girl."

"Whew!" Ham exclaimed. "And Renny Renwick is not light!"

"Where do the footprints go?" Monk asked anxiously.

He was remembering his taunting of Renny over Bull Pizano's prowess. Now it appeared that the big engineer had fallen victim to the huge jersey-clad crook.

"Back to the city," the **Bronze Man** said. "Which is where will go."

"But it's almost dawn!" Tom Franklin protested. "And Taxus still wants to throw us all in that hideous snake pit!"

"Nevertheless ..." Doc began ...

... but Monk cut him off with a sudden squawl.

"Lookit! Out on the bay .. A ship!"

XVIII -- The "Mighty"

The ship was Blackbird Hinton's tramp freighter -- the *Mighty*.

Dawn was now spreading a **crimson** flush to the east and the rose coloration touched the ocean. The *Mighty* steamed in out of the south. Doc Savage recognized her lines. To the north, the angry *gobble* of the perpetual monsoon storms which surrounded *Python Isle* reverberated.

"Now we know why that overfed crow didn't care about losing his plane," Monk rumbled. "He was plannin' on usin' that tub to make off with King Solomon's gold all along. They musta been runnin' under forced draft ever since Blackbird cleared outta Cape Town."

"There is still time to head Blackbird off," Doc Savage rapped.

He spun on Tom Franklin.

"Franklin, our only chance of thwarting Blackbird now is to seize the treasure ahead of him. You know where it is."

The redheaded aviator looked at the **bronze giant** ... then dropped his eyes shamefully. He bit his cracked lips, hesitated ...

Doc Savage said: "I know you want the Ophir **gold** for yourself."

Franklin swallowed uncomfortably under the **Bronze Man's** steady gaze. He started to shove his hands into his skirt pockets ... winced **painfully** ... and extracted the flayed fingers.

"Yeah, that was it all along," he confessed. "I had no intention of coming to you in the first place. That was just a story I fed Lha to convince her to help me get back to civilization. I needed her to prove I wasn't crazy. That's why I had the scroll history of Python Isle too. I was going to hire some crooks to help organize an expedition to get the **gold**."

"But that damned Blackbird captured us first and balled things up. When I got loose, I figured you could bail me out and I would double-cross you later. I...I guess greed got the better of me. I've been a fool."

"Where is the treasure?" Doc Savage repeated gently.

There was no reproach in his tone. Tom Franklin had suffered greatly and was obvious repentant over his misdeeds.

"You know that grain storehouse we were in?" Frank asked. "The floor is false. Under one of the mounds is a trapdoor. That's where the Ophir treasure is."

"I was wondering why a storage building would have a secret exit," Ham remarked.

"Blackbird could not readily remove the **gold** before his freighter arrived, obviously," Doc told the others. "Once he learns that the ship is here, he will waste no time. We must hurry."

The group raced back to the city.

They made for the gate and crouched behind some foliage when they spotted the 2 guards.

"Ham, give me your machine-pistol," Doc Savage directed.

The dapper lawyer (who was not so "dapper" now) passed over his nearly-empty weapon.

The **Bronze Man** set the pistol on single-shot and snapped off 2 quick shots, seemingly without aiming.

The pair of guards hit the ground simultaneously so rapidly did he fire.

Doc returned the mercy pistol and they slipped into the city. They found the storehouse to be deserted. The door had been closed. But they worked the bamboo pole loose in short order. The Sun had risen above the horizon. Jungle birds made sounds not far away.

Tom Franklin led them to a mound of grain in the rear. All noticed that it was dirtier than the other piles and had not been touched in years.

"Under here," Franklin pointed.

Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, and Ham Brooks busied themselves digging at the grain pile. They scattered the coarse granules in big handfuls.

Monk scooped away with both hands working. He managed to throw some of the grain in Ham's face, causing the sharp-tongued lawyer to vent some choice words in the hairs chemist's direction. Unable to use his hands efficiently, Tom Franklin kept watch.

In a remarkably short time, they uncovered the trapdoor. It was locked with some type of staple-and-hasp arrangement that was designed to be opened only by a cutting tool.

Doc Savage reached down ... grasped the hasp ... and wrenched it loose by sheer **strength**.

The others evinced no great astonishment at this feat. They were used to the almost unbelievable **power** that reposed in the **Bronze Man**'s thews.

Doc lifted the trapdoor ...

Although it was dawn, there was comparatively little light in the rear of the storage building. They had worked chiefly by the light of one of Doc Savage's tiny spring-generator flashlights. But when he raised the trapdoor, the murky interior seemed to fill with a mellow **glow**.

The floor under the trap was indeed hollow. **There was gold down here.** Much of it. Many millions worth, perhaps. ***It almost staggered the imagination.*** Most of it was in the shape of small statuettes and drinking cups and like objects.

There were a few crude ingots. Monk picked one up. It gave like butter under his strong fingers.

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"Soft," he squeaked. "Almost pure **gold**."

"The **gold** of Ophir was reputed to be the purest in the ancient world," Doc Savage supplied.

Tom Franklin had been drawn to their side when the treasure was uncovered. He stared down for long moments at the **yellow** stuff which was shining under the flashlight glow. He said nothing.

He might have been pondering all that he had been through and suffered for want of what now lay at his feet.

"Well well. Now don't that make a pretty picture!" Blackbird Hinton's cruel voice cut in on their thoughts.

Monk whirled.

"Blazes! They found us!"

It was true. Blackbird Hinton, King Hancock, big Bull Pizano, and Taxus and his adherents had crept up on them after Tom Franklin left his post. They advanced confidently.

Crow-like Blackbird held his spike-nosed pistol at waist level with a sneer of evil satisfaction on his lips. The ugly weapon was pointed at the unprotected chest of Doc Savage.

"No tricks now!" Blackbird snarled. "Frisk 'em, lads!"

Bull Pizano and King Hancock relieved Monk and Ham of their now useless machine-pistols and other small equipment. Franklin was unarmed. Doc Savage obviously carried no weapons on his almost-nude body.

The 2 thugs retreated. Bull was grinning but King Hancock seemed strangely subdued.

"This getting' captured stuff is startin' to get me down," Monk muttered to no one in particular.

Taxus screeched orders. His warriors surrounded the quartet and dragged them roughly out of the building. Doc Savage and the others did not resist. That would have been foolhardy.

Guards were placed over the **gold**.

"This is working out swell," Blackbird Hinton crowed as the **Bronze Man** and his men were marched through the city. "We already have the girl and that big dope called 'Renny'. Now you lubbers can join him in the **python pit**!"

He laughed again. Big Bull Pizano joined in the evil murth. Even hawk-faced Taxus added to the raucous merriment, causing his brush-shaped beard to waggle like an imp's spiked tail.

But Taxus' eyes were not laughing.

*They were on the **Man of Bronze** whose metallic calmness was unnerving.*

XIX -- The Python Pit

The prisoners were conducted without ceremony to the great dirt pit occupying the plaza in front of the palace. As it was now morning, there were people about. And they in turn -- drawn by knowledge of the fate intended for the **Bronze Man** and his men -- trailed along.

There was much muttering in the crowd. Doc Savage noticed several of the individuals who had been present during his appeal to the supporters of Queen Lha. They were surreptitiously accosting certain others and conversing in low tones.

By the time that Doc, Monk, and Ham, and Franklin had arrived at the python pit, a sizable crowd had gathered there. Fully the entire population of *Python Isle* -- men, women, and children -- were congregated.

In the manner of crowds the World over, there was some pushing and jostling over the best views. But this activity was held somewhat in check by the fact that no one cared to stand too close to the tiled edge of the pit.

The spectators ringed the python pit on 3 sides. Doc and the others were driven at spear point through the opening and to the rim.

A deep voice rumbled out of the depression.

"Holy cow! They got you too!"

It was Renny Renwick. He was unbound and evidently unharmed.

The Solomon warriors prodded Doc and the rest of the captives sharply. Monk swiped out a hairy paw and snagged a spear. He endeavored to brain his tormentor with it.

But 3 other spears converged on his simian form and he desisted. The spear was taken from the apish chemist.

Their backs were to the pit.

"It would be better to jump down under our own power," Doc told them. "Otherwise we will be forced into the pit. And there is no need to injure ourselves pointlessly."

The *bronze giant* dropped over the edge. The others followed including Franklin who landed painfully.

Monk ambled over to Renny. The top of the huge engineer's head was gummy with **blood**. But he did not appear to have suffered serious damage. A slight smile warped his long face. Conversely, this meant he was unhappy.

"I see you came out second best, Big Fists," Monk said sarcastically. "Still think Bull Pizano is overrated?"

"Second best nothing!" Renny roared. "I didn't even see him coming! He snuck up from behind and conked me on the head! If I had gotten in one punch ..."

Ham Brooks doubled over with laughter.

"He-he didn't even get a punch in!" Ham howled.

"How would you like your head handed to you you, Lawyer?" Renny asked menacingly.

"Why don't you all hurry up and kill each other before Taxus does?" Tom Franklin spat.

His freckled face was disgusted.

A ***buzz*** went through the crowd then.

Surrounded by his archers, Taxus stepped onto the palace stairs where he had earlier addressed the populace. He commenced another of his bombastic exhortations.

Queen Lha was produced from the palace and brought before the mob. She was not taken to the pit. It was a concession made to current public sentiment.

The crowd went deathly silent.

Taxus gave a strident command.

Several of his soldiers emerged down the palace steps. They were in 3 groups, each bearing a large tightly-covered earthenware vessel.

"Uh-oh," Monk said. His small eyes narrowed belligerently.

The 3 groups approached the pit rim and set down the vessels.

Grimly silent, Doc Savage pushed his men back and herded them to the far wall. Above them, spear-carrying warriors tensed, ready in case the prisoners attempted to scale up the sides of the pit.

But the captives only stared at the sinister-looking jars which were now being shed of the vines holding their covers in place. **No one doubted that each jar contained a fully grown python, tightly coiled.**

Several of the Solomon soldiers upended one of the huge vessels.

"Here it comes!" Renny groaned.

Monk turned to Ham Brooks.

"Shyster," he began, "it's been nice knowin' ..."

*There came a frightened **squealing** from above.*

A commotion tore through the crowd and flashed toward the pit and into Monk's furry arms.

"Habeas!" Monk yowled. "Where've you been?"

Despite the nearness of Death, the apish chemist looked positively joyous to see the pet pig who had vanished after they had first been seized by Taxus' minions.

"That fool hog doesn't know enough to stay away from trouble," Ham said unkindly.

Then he goaded the hairy chemist.

"What was that you were saying a minute ago, Monk?"

"Nuthin'," the homely chemist said absently while scratching the shoat's sail-like ears.

Once the interruption had passed, the soldiers resumed their work. They held the upturned jar so that its lid hung over the rim. One of them gave it a resounding kick!

The lid popped off and an ugly brown mass fell out and unraveled its scaly length on the floor of the pit. It stirred torpidly like a deformed dog sniffing around a new backyard.

"Good Grief!" Ham breathed. "It must be **30 feet** long!"

Franklin nodded soberly.

"One of the largest on the whole island. They are kept in captivity and trained for these trials. **Trained to kill humans.**"

Another earthenware vessel was dragged forward, unlashed, and banged on its backside. A second python spilled out like a coil of rope. It lay still as if stunned.

The first snake slithered over to it ...

... and toward Doc Savage and his men!

The Solomon warriors had a bit of difficulty with the 3rd jar.

They got it to the rim intact. But when one applied his foot to it, the vessel cracked open, disgorging its contents in their midst.

The serpent -- displeased at the treatment accorded it -- proceeded to wrap itself around the ribs of a *screaming* warrior.

Taxus screeched more orders. His hawk-like face looked frantic. His hooked nose hung down almost to his chin, witch-fashion.

He retreated several paces (although he was already far from the escaped reptile). At his side, Queen Lha favored him with a look of complete disgust.

The soldiers fell upon the writhing serpent. They got down and attempted to wrestle it off the screaming unfortunate. It took 20 of them ... but they succeeded.

The released Taxus soldier did not move after he had been freed.

Monk Mayfair -- always a bloodthirsty soul -- grunted: "That one got a taste of his own medicine!"

The soldiers took hold of the snake and bodily bore its squirming length to the pit. They were like firemen wrestling a high-pressure hose. Only the serpent's head was visible so completely was it enwrapped in human arms.

They line up on the pit edge and pitched the looping reptile over. It began moving at once.

All 3 pythons were now active and gliding in the prisoners' direction. Habeas Corpus emitted a dog-like whine.

"This is it," Franklin moaned with his back to the wall. "We can fight them barehanded or let them take us. Either way, it comes out the same."

Monk snorted angrily!

"Me, I'm fightin'!"

"That goes for me too!" Renny added, low-voiced.

Ham stepped forward resolutely.

But Doc Savage waved all of them back.

"Stand our ground," he directed. "I want to try something."

His skin shining like polished *metal* in the Sun, the **Bronze Man** padded toward the pythons. He adjusted his black silk trunks with both hands and let them drop to his sides.

"He's crazy!" Tom Franklin burst out. "Even as strong as he is, he's no match for those things!"

Ever alert, Ham Brooks ventured: "I think Doc has 'something up his sleeve'. Figuratively-speaking, that is."

An **Atlas** of calm *metal*, Doc Savage approached to within 10 feet of the moving nest of reptiles. They were ugly beasts, the hue of varnished mud. Sunlight reflected in tiny spots on their scaly hides as if droplets of molten steel had been spattered along their muscular lengths.

Ignoring the pythons, the **Bronze Man** turned to Taxus and fixed him with his *golden* orbs. Globules of sweat broke out on the fake sorcerer's corpulent visage. Next to him, Queen Lha took in a sharp breath.

Doc raised his hands to the crowd. First in one direction. Then in the other.

He held his fingers apart with the thumbs nestled against his **bronze** palms. The hands appeared to be empty. The crowd buzzed.

Doc Savage saw Blackbird Hinton, King Hancock, and Bull Pizano mixed in amongst the spectators. Expectation showed in their faces.

Hancock, however, was looking at Queen Lha.

Having demonstrated his hands to be empty, the **Man of Bronze** waited for the pythons to approach him. He held his arms up high and made arcane gestures.

His powerful **voice** lifted. The words that came from his lips were neither English nor ancient Hebrew. They might have been a lucking gibberish ...

... but they caused Monk Mayfair to grin widely. His nubbin head all-but-disappeared behind that grin.

The pythons slithered up to the **Bronze Man's** bare feet. Their spade-shaped heads reared up, their tongues flicking.

Doc Savage gave his hands a twist as if were <snapping> his fingers. He waved them under-and-around the reptiles' unlovely heads. Their eyes were the color of egg yolk.

The monster pythons weaved back-and-forth. Their heads darted at Doc's hands. But the latter were too quick for them. They became blurs when the eye attempted to follow.

One python abruptly dropped its head.

Then another.

It was as if they were puppets whose strings had been cut.

The third python rested its head on the back of a slumbering fellow and joined it in insensibility.

Doc Savage stepped back from the inert tangle of scale-sheathed muscle. He presented his empty hands to the crowd and then to a sputtering Taxus. This time, he held out his thumbs too.

There was a shocked silence during which no one moved or spoke.

Doc Savage's uncanny **flake-gold eyes** raked the crowd. He saw that Blackbird and his men were no longer present. That fact did not appear to surprise him greatly. (But then, he never showed emotion unless for a purpose.)

Suddenly, a shrill voice which he recognized as belonging to the old woman Hagai cried.

"The Man of Metal has conquered the sacred pythons! This proves Taxus is a false one! Death to Taxus!!"

The mobs -- as they usually do -- caught fire instantly.

Shouts of "Death to Taxus!" and "Down with the false one!" passed from mouth-to-mouth. Men fell upon the minions of Taxus. Women and children scattered.

A wildly screaming knot of men surged toward the **purple**-robed sorcerer.

Dragging Queen Lha along for protection against flying missiles, Taxus retreated. The beautiful ruler fought him every step of the way, inflicting considerable damage to his face.

The sorcerer's archers were set to defend his escape. But before they could nock their arrows, they were trampled by an **angry wave of humanity!**

Pandemonium had broken loose and under its cover, Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, Renny Renwick, and Tom Franklin got organized and boosted themselves out of the python pit.

A soldier promptly attacked them.

But the **bronze giant** waded in ... got his spear ... and snapped it in halves.

The impressed soldier betook himself away with haste.

They surveyed the scene.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed. "Talk about your revolutions!"

Everywhere, men were seething and boiling about in bloody combat. Only the warriors of Taxus were armed. But they were still heavily outnumbered.

Monk let out a whooping **roar**.

"Let's go to town, brothers!"

The apish chemist grabbed the nearest soldier and endeavored to disassemble him bodily.

Renny and Ham split up ... found targets ... and went to work with their fists.

Even Tom Franklin -- his hands clubbed in excruciating **agony** -- ignored his injuries and joined the fray.

Doc Savage -- a **metal shadow** -- melted into the conflict. He paused only twice to render a foe unconscious with his steel-strong fingers and passed beyond the fighting.

No one dared molest him.

XX -- Birds of a Black Feather

Doc Savage got away from the fighting as rapidly as possible.

He ran barefoot through the otherwise-deserted metropolis. He made no sound and was unconcerned about the small cuts on his feet. The latter were the result of stepping onto the broken glass vials back in the python pit.

These had contained the chemical vapor with which he had stupefied the pythons. They had been concealed in the waistband of his trunks all along. He had prepared them from Monk Mayfair's portable chemical laboratory back at the plane.

The **Bronze Man** had palmed them ... held the tiny vials under his thumbs where they could not be seen ... and broken them open under the nose of the deadly serpents. He himself was not affected because he had held his breath. The chemical vaporized quickly.

He had counted upon his display of "mumbo-jumbo" to rally the already-restless crowd against Taxus and had so informed his men (in ancient *Mayan*) during the feat in order that they would be prepared for action. He had instructed them to help rout Taxus' followers.

But the *Man of Bronze* was not thinking of that as he whipped for the grain storehouse which held the **gold** of King Solomon.

He was thinking of the head start which Blackbird Hinton had gotten.

The treasure was now gone. He had expected that.

There were 2 bodies where the **gold** had reposed. Taxus guards, their skulls crushed like eggshells. Obviously Bull Pizano's work. Clotted **blood** had dried enough, Doc's expert eyes saw, to confirm his worst fears.

Blackbird's appearance during the python trial had been a smokescreen to lull Taxus' suspicions. The Ophir treasure was no doubt already well on its way to the waiting sea tramp *Mighty*.

The **Bronze Man** left the city, passing 2 more Taxus' guards at the gate. They were sprawled grotesquely on the ground, shot to death.

He raced to the edge of the upper terrace of the island. This afforded him a view of the water. Below, he saw the *Mighty* anchored a short distance off shore. There were several launches passing between the tramp and the shoreline. **Gold** gleamed amid their thwarts.

Farther inland could be seen the figures of Blackbird Hinton, Bull Pizano, and King Hancock working through the jungle.

Not far behind them, Taxus -- a fat splotch of **purple** -- trailed, dragging an active Queen Lha. Taxus was getting the worst of it.

They would all reach the Mighty before he could overhaul them, Doc realized.

The **bronze giant** plunged down to the next sloping level. He flashed through the rank jungle into the valley where his plane set.

Once in his haste, his foot whetted the dry back of one of the Isle's slumbering pythons. But he was gone before the reptile bestirred itself.

He found his tri-motor aircraft intact. He drove a hand into the dirt at the cliff base ... unearthed 2 tins of fuel ... and poured their contents into one of the big craft's tanks. He would have filled both tanks but there was no time.

He boarded the ship and got the motors going. Its props spinning alloy disks, the tri-motor lumbered around ... gathered momentum ... and volleyed into the sunlight.

When he had achieved sufficient altitude, Doc banked the big ship and pointed it toward the rattlesnake's tail of a jetty in the vicinity of which the *Mighty* was weighing anchor.

The **Bronze Man** passed over the freighter as the last of the launches beat toward the ship. On deck, several figures milled. Among them, Doc was surprised to see the squat figure of Taxus. The unscrupulous sorcerer must have persuaded Blackbird to take him along with his cause now lost.

Seeing no sign of Queen Lha, Doc Savage came around for another pass. As he brought the tri-motor level, he opened a valve on a large high-pressure cylinder which he had balanced across the copilot seat before taking off. A hose led from this and out an open window.

Almost immediately, greasy black **smoke** gushed out and was dragged behind the plane by slipstream. None of it got into the cabin.

Dragging a genie of **soot** along, the tri-motor passed low over the *Mighty*. A few ragged shots came from the ship. They missed.

As the great **pall** settled, some of the crew dropped their weapons and fell down. Others scattered, covering their mouths. Doc could see Blackbird Hinton jumping up-and-down in **rage!**

Seeing that the gas (the cylinder was charged with a combination of smoke and the fast-acting anesthetic gas which he always used) was having the desired effect, Doc brought the plane around for a third pass.

*The **Bronze Man** got a bad break then.*

From the deck of the *Mighty*, Blackbird's crew opened fire again with an assortment of armament. Virtually every crew member had come up on deck in an attempt to fight off Doc Savage's attack. He had expected such a response.

With the **gold** of Ophir finally in his hands, the crow-like Blackbird Hinton was determined to escape at all costs. But what the **Bronze Man** did not expect was that one of the tramp's crew would have a high-powered rifle and -- in addition -- be a crack shot.

Or perhaps it was that the worthy was just lucky. Doc Savage never did learn the truth.
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A single shot hit the tri-motor as it angled for the *Mighty*. Doc heard the familiar sound of a bullet punching through metal. He ignored it. He realized that tri-motor's filled fuel tank had been punctured when all 3 engines began to sputter and quit simultaneously. The aircraft went into a stall.

His pass uncompleted, Doc shut off the gas cylinder. Then he booted the ship around ... leveled off ... and made what was under the circumstances a fair forced landing on the water.

The tri-motor sloshed to a rest and wallowed at a point midway between shore and the jetty of rocks which resembled a rattlesnake's tail from the air.

His face mirroring intense concern, Doc Savage clambered out onto a wing. The last of the fuel was stringing out of the wing tank. The tri-motor -- not a fighting ship -- had been no match for the well-armed Blackbird crew.

The *Mighty* was now under way. But -- curiously -- it was not streaming out to sea.

Rather, it was heading inland!

Doc realized why when men lined the brass rails and started sniping at him. Lead rained and punched holes in the fuselage. He pitched into the craft's cabin and stationed himself behind a stanchion.

Its funnels belching black smoke, the tramp plowed toward the helpless plane which was being carried toward the rocks by the strong circular currents surrounding *Python Isle*. Bullets spanked the rocks and whined off into space.

The tri-motor banged its nose against the jetty ... turned ... and rested its wounded flank against the rocks.

Doc Savage slipped from the ship and got behind sheltering stone.

He watched the tramp steamer bear down on his position. He could see Blackbird proudly preening as his men blazed away like an exaggerated firing squad.

King Hancock was at his side. But Taxus was nowhere to be seen.

Then Doc noticed the slight lightening in the color of the water in front of the *Mighty*'s foaming bows. Diamond-hard lights came into his **golden eyes**. He lifted his voice in a crashing shout.

"Blackbird! Turn back! You are ..."

A volley of snapping gunfire drowned out his words. He ducked for cover.

Blackbird Hinton's raucous reply came back.

"Forget it, Savage! I'm taking no prisoners. I've got what I want!"

Doc cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Blackbird! Hancock! Turn back! Your ship is in danger! There is ..."

"Tell it to Davy Jones!" Blackbird laughed.

The gunfire continued.

It was no use, Doc realized grimly.

There came a **sound** remindful of a great monster groaning. It was followed by a metallic **wrenching** and a rush of water.

Then the **screaming** -- hoarse and panic-stricken -- began.

The Mighty had struck the underwater reef that Doc Savage had attempted to warn Blackbird about. A great rent showed on one side extending from bow to amidships. Seawater gushed into that thirsty maw. The tramp lurched and began to roll.

The **Bronze Man** leaped into the water and with powerful strokes attempted to swim to the stricken vessel. But the circular current hampered him and bore him inexorably back to his plane.

He made repeated efforts. He even tried swimming underwater before giving up. But it was hopeless.

Doc Savage climbed back onto the tail-like rocks in time to see the *Mighty* go down. It was on its side in deep water. The funnels dipped into the brine, extinguishing themselves like gigantic cigars.

The old tub rolled again ... presented its keel to the sky ... then slowly slid into the boiling water.

Debris surfaced over the spot where the ship had gone down. Some constituted human wreckage floating face down. A few figures thrashed the water in panic.

Doc Savage saw Taxus clearly. The sorcerer blubbered imprecations ...

... then his visage slipped from view.

Not far away, Bull Pizano's round ball of a head bobbed. A few mewing felines floundered near him. He was howling profanity and hanging on to his floating bat.

After a while, only the bat remained.

The others -- including a frantic Blackbird Hinton -- drowned in similar fashion.

The **Bronze Man** did not spy Queen Lha who was doubtless lost.

The last to go was King Hancock. His debonair features were calm in the face of Death as if he had made his peace with the world.

Then there were only the gray fins of the sharks cutting the water.

Big and **bronze** and grim, Doc Savage did not watch that part. He tracked the rocks toward shore.

His face was a mask. The gold of his eyes strangely dull.

Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Renny Renwick, and Tom Franklin had seen the whole climax from inland. They were waiting for the **Bronze Man** on shore.

"Taxus' men didn't do much better," Renny informed him.

Doc nodded.

They made a sober, silent group as they trudged back toward the city.

They found Queen Lha quite by accident.

She was stumbling through the jungle, a bit dazed. All were struck speechless to see her as they had presumed she had gone down with the *Mighty*.

"Taxus was going to take me with him," Lha explained while Doc translated. "But the one called Hancock set me free at the last moment without being seen."

She began to cry.

"He...he liked me."

Monk -- casting a sidewise glance at a downcast Tom Franklin -- remarked: "Sometimes you can't tell the good apples from the bad just by lookin' at em."

Later that day, Doc Savage and Renny Renwick repaired the punctured tri-motor's fuel tank and moored the craft safely to the jetty. They did not leave *Python Isle* immediately.

There was the matter of the Ophir **gold** which lay submerged in the *Mighty's* hull.

As a favor to Queen Lha, they dived into the sunken hulk and retrieved the treasure. *Along with several bodies.*

That done, Queen Lha insisted that the **Bronze Man** and his friends stay until she had been formally restored to her throne. They were only too glad to do that. The people proved to be friendly now that Taxus and his cohorts had been vanquished.

Although the perpetual monsoon storms **rumbled** in the distance, it did not rain once during the remainder of their stay. All-in-all, they enjoyed their pleasant sojourn on the tiny isle.

Especially Monk and Ham once they learned that the average Python Islander kept 3 wives. There was some talk of them staying, none of it serious.

Doc Savage found that the inhabitants maintained a library of scrolls daring back to the days of King Solomon and the lost land of Ophir.

After the coronation of Queen Lha during which he and his men were feted for their heroism, Doc secluded himself in this library for 3 days, ostensibly to study.

But his aides privately suspected he only wanted to avoid pretty Queen Lha who had been hinting that the *bronze giant* would make a suitable royal consort.

When he emerged, he told the others that the parchment texts would shed invaluable light on certain mysteries. Not the least of which was the true location of fabled Ophir, the source of King Solomon's wealth.

Tom Franklin -- who had been uncommunicative since the whole affair had ended -- approached the Doc Savage dispiritedly on the day they were to depart. The **Bronze Man** had tended to the former's wounded hands and they were on the mend.

"I've been the cause of a lot of trouble," he said simply.

Doc regarded him quietly.

"And you have suffered for it."

Franklin nodded.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked humbly.

"We have decided to keep the existence of this place a secret," Doc told him. "The people are happy here now that Taxus is gone. They deserve to live unmolested. You could remain here. Or if you wish, go to a place I maintain where people like yourself are cleansed of their bad pasts and re-educated to become useful members of society."

Tom Franklin looked in the direction of proud Queen Lha.

The latter disdainfully averted her face.

"I don't belong here," he told the **Bronze Man** sadly.

Monk Mayfair ambled up a little later.

"Look what I found floating in the water!" he squeaked. "Bull Pizano's baseball bat. That's probably all that the sharks left of 'im."

Renny snorted disdainfully!

"If I'd've only gotten a crack at that guy ..."

"You'd have more than just a knot on your thick head," Ham inserted.

"Oh yeah?" Renny growled. "Just because he ran circles around you 2 clowns doesn't mean I couldn't whip him!"

"He'd have fed you your own **fists**," Monk stated confidently. "At least we gave him a fight. You were just another nick in his bat. Take it from someone who knows. That Bull Pizano was one tough cookie!"

Renny -- who was rankled by his lost chance to tangle with the big crook -- chased Monk and Ham the length of Python Isle. Without success.

The three argued over the prowess of the late Bull Pizano all during the long flight home.

Much to the detriment of Doc Savage's peace-of-mind!

*New York's newshawks work overtime in a flurry of flashbulb explosions as they clamor for the scoop on the insidious wave of bodies turning up around the City. All struck dead, eyes turned an unseeing white ... the **Blind Death!***

*As police riot-guns and gangland tommy-guns turn the winter snows of Manhattan **scarlet**, Doc Savage discovers that the mysterious plague is the result of an audacious scheme to unite all of New York's criminal elements against him*

Their evil goal ...

*to seize the fabled Mayan wealth of the **Man of Bronze!***

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